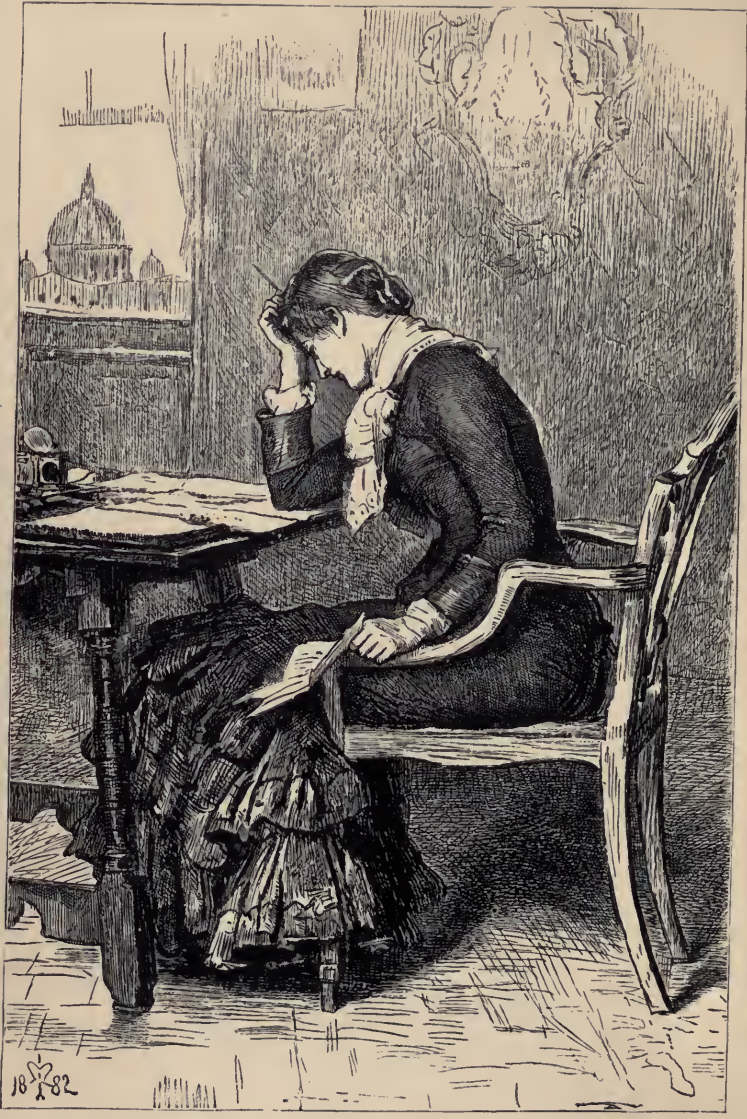
KEPT IN THE DARK

VOL. I.

LONDON : PRINTED BY
SPOTTISWOODE AND CO., NEW-STREET SQUARE
AND PARLIAMENT STREET


1882

KEPT IN THE DARK

A NOVEL

BY

ANTHONY TROLLOPE

IN TWO VOLUMES

VOL. I.

With a FRONTISPIECE by J. E. MILLAIS, R.A.

London

CHATTO & WINDUS, PICCADILLY

1882

CONTENTS

OF

THE FIRST VOLUME.

KEPT IN THE DARK

CHAPTER I.

CECILIA HOLT AND HER THREE FRIENDS.

THERE came an episode in the life of Cecilia Holt which it is essential should first be told. When she was twenty-two years old she was living with her mother at Exeter. Mrs. Holt was a widow with comfortable means,—ample that is for herself and her daughter to supply them with all required by provincial comfort and provincial fashion. They had a house without the city, with a garden and a gardener and two boys, and they kept a brougham, which was the joint care of the gardener and

the boy inside and the boy outside. They saw their friends and were seen by them. Once in the year they left home for a couple of months and went,—wherever the daughter wished. Sometimes there was a week or two in London; sometimes in Paris or Switzerland. The mother seemed to be only there to obey the daughter's behests, and Cecilia was the most affectionate of masters. Nothing could have been less disturbed or more happy than their lives. No doubt there was present in Cecilia's manner a certain looking down upon her mother,—of which all the world was aware, unless it was her mother and herself. The mother was not blessed by literary tastes, whereas Cecilia was great among French and German poets. And Cecilia was æsthetic, whereas the mother thought more of the delicate providing of the table. Cecilia had two or three female friends, who were not

quite her equals in literature but nearly so. There was Maude Hippesley, the Dean's daughter, and Miss Altifiorla, the daughter of an Italian father who had settled in Exeter with her maternal aunt,—in poor circumstances, but with an exalted opinion as to her own blood. Francesca Altifiorla was older than her friend, and was, perhaps, the least loved of the three, but the most often seen. And there was Mrs. Green, the Minor Canon's wife, who had the advantage of a husband, but was nevertheless humble and retiring. They formed the *élite* of Miss Holt's society and were called by their Christian names. The Italian's name was Francesca and the married lady was called Bessy.

Cecilia had no lovers till there came in an evil hour to Exeter one Sir Francis Geraldine. She had somewhat scoffed at love, or at the necessity of having a lover. She and Miss

Altifiorla had been of one mind on that subject. Maude Hippesley had a lover and could not be supposed to give her accord. Mrs. Green had had one, but expressed an opinion that it was a trouble well over. A husband might be a comfort, but a lover was a 'bother.' 'It's such a blessing to be able to wear my old gloves before him. He doesn't mind it now as he knows he'll have to pay for the new.' But at length there came the lover. Sir Francis Geraldine was a man who had property in the county but had not lately lived upon it. He was of an old family, of which he was very proud. He was an old baronet, a circumstance which he seemed to think was very much in his favour. Good heavens! From what a height did he affect to look down upon the peers of the last twenty years. His property was small, but so singular were his gifts that he was able to be proud of that also. It had all been in the

possession of his family since the time of James I. And he was a man who knew everything though only forty, and by no means old in appearance. But, if you were to believe him, he had all that experience of the world which nothing but unlimited years could have given him. He knew all the Courts in Europe, and all the race courses,—and more especially all the Jacks and Toms who had grown into notoriety in those different worlds of fashion. He came to Exeter to stay with his brother-in-law, the Dean, and to look after his property for a while. There he fell in love with Cecilia Holt, and, after a fortnight of prosperous love-making, made her an offer. This the young lady accepted, averse as she was to lovers, and for a month was the happiest and proudest girl in all Exeter. The happiness and pride of a girl in her lover is something wonderful to behold. He is surely the only man, and she

the only woman born worthy of such a man. She is to be the depository of all his secrets, and the recipient of all his thoughts. That other young ladies should accept her with submission in this period of her ecstasy would be surprising were it not that she is so truly exalted by her condition as to make her for a short period an object to them of genuine worship. In this way, for a month or six weeks, did Miss Holt's friends submit to her and bear with her. They endured to be considered but as the outside personages of an indifferent outer world, whereas Cecilia herself with her lover were the only two inhabitants of the small celestial empire in which they lived. Then there gradually came to be a change. And it must be acknowledged here that the change commenced with Cecilia Holt herself.

The greater the adoration of the girl the deeper the abyss into which she falls,—if she be

doomed to fall at all. A month of imperfection she can bear, even though the imperfections be very glaring. For a month, or perhaps for six weeks, the desire to subject herself to a newly-found superior being supports her spirit against all trials. Neglect when it first comes is not known to be neglect. The first bursts of ill-temper have about them something of the picturesque,—or at any rate of the grotesque. Even the selfishness is displayed on behalf of an object so exalted as to be excusable. So it was with Cecilia Holt. The period of absolute, unmistaken, unreasonable love lasted but for six weeks after her engagement. During those six weeks all Exeter knew of it. There was no reticence on the part of any one. Sir Francis Geraldine had fallen in love with Cecilia Holt and a great triumph had been won. Cecilia, in spite of her general well-known objection to lovers, had triumphed a little. It

is not to be supposed that she had miscarried herself outrageously. He is cold-hearted, almost cruel, who does not like to see the little triumph of a girl in such circumstances, who will not sympathise with her, and join with her, if occasion come, in her exaltation. No fault was found with Cecilia among her friends in Exeter, but it was a fact that she did triumph. How it was that the time of her worship then came to an end it would be difficult to say. She was perhaps struck by neglect, or something which appeared to her to be almost scorn. And the man himself, she found, was ignorant. The ill-temper had lost its picturesqueness, and become worse than grotesque. And the selfishness seemed to be displayed on an object not so high as to render it justifiable. Then came a fortnight of vacillating misery, in which she did not dare to tell her discomfort to either of her friends. Her

mother, who, though she could not read Schiller, was as anxious for her daughter's happiness as any mother could be, saw something of this and at last ventured to ask a question. 'Was not Francis to have been here this morning?'

Cecilia was at that moment thinking of her lover, thinking that he had been untrue to his tryst now for the third time; and thinking also that she knew him to be untrue not with any valid excuse, not with the slightest cause for an excuse, but with a pre-determination to show the girl to whom he was engaged that it did not suit him any longer to be at the trouble of serving her. 'Oh, mamma, how foolish you are! How can I tell what Sir Francis Geraldine may be doing?'

'But I thought he was to have been here.'

'Mamma, please understand that I do not carry him about tied to my apron-strings.

When it pleases him to come he will come.' Then she went on with her book and was silent for a minute or two. Then she broke out again. 'I am sure there ought to be a rule in life that people when they are engaged should never see each other again till they meet in the church.'

'I don't think that would do at all, my dear.'

'Perhaps things were different when you were young. The world becomes less simple every day. However, mamma, we must put up with Sir Francis whether he come or whether he remain away.'

'The world may be less simple,' said Mrs. Holt after a pause, 'but I don't think it half so nice. Young men used to think that there was nothing so pleasant as a young lady's company when,—when,—when they were engaged, you know.' Then the con-

versation ended, and the morning passed without the coming of Sir Francis.

After that a week passed,—with great forbearance on the part of Cecilia. She thought herself at least to be forbearing. She thought much of her lover, and had no doubt tried to interest herself in the usual conversation of her friends. But they, by the end of the week, perceived that Sir Francis was never first spoken of by herself. To Maude Hippesley it was very difficult to avoid an expression of her doubts, because Maude was niece to Sir Francis. And Sir Francis was much talked about at the Deanery. 'My uncle was not down here this morning,' Maude would say:—and then she would go on to excuse the defalcation. He had had business requiring his immediate attention,—probably something as to the marriage settlements. 'But of course he will tell you all that.'

Cecilia saw through the little attempts. Maude was quite aware that Sir Francis was becoming weary of his lover's cares, and made the best excuse she could for them. But Maude Hippesley never had liked her uncle.

'Oh, my dear Maude,' said Cecilia, 'pray let him do what he pleases with himself in these the last days of his liberty. When he has got a wife he must attend to her,—more or less. Now he is as free as air. Pray let him do as he pleases, and for heaven's sake do not bother him!' Maude who had her own lover, and was perfectly satisfied with him though she had been engaged to him for nearly twelve months, knew that things were not going well, and was unhappy. But at the moment she said nothing further.

'Where is this recreant knight?' said Francesca. There was something in the tone of Miss Altifiorla's voice which grated against

Cecilia's ears, and almost made her angry. But she knew that in her present condition it behoved her to be especially careful. Had she resolved to break with her betrothed she would have been quite open on the subject to all her friends. She would have been open to all Exeter. But in her present condition of mind she was resolved,—she thought she was resolved,—to go on with her marriage.

'Why you should call him a recreant knight, I cannot for the life of me understand,' she said. 'But it seems that Sir Francis, who is not exactly in his first youth, is supposed to be as attentive as a young turtle dove.'

'I always used to think,' said Miss Altifiorla gravely, 'that a gentleman was bound to keep his promise.'

'Oh heavens, how grave you all are! A gentleman and his promise! Do you mean

to assert that Sir Francis is no gentleman, and does not keep his promises? Because if so I shall be angry.' Then there was an end of that conversation.

But she was stirred to absolute anger by what took place with Mrs. Green, though she was unable to express her anger. Mrs. Green's manner to her had always been that of a somewhat humble friend,—of one who lived in lodgings in the High Street, and who accepted dinners without returning them. And since this engagement with Sir Francis had become a fact, her manner had become perhaps a little more humble. She used to say of herself that of course she was poor; of course she had nothing to give. Her husband was only a Minor Canon, and had married her, alas, without a fortune. It is not to be supposed that on this account Cecilia was inclined to ill-treat her friend; but the

way of the world is such. People are taken and must be taken in the position they frame for themselves. Mrs. Green was Cecilia Holt's humble friend, and as such was expected to be humble. When, therefore, she volunteered a little advice to Cecilia about her lover, it was not taken altogether in good part. 'My dear Cecilia,' she said, 'I do really think that you ought to say something to Sir Francis.'

'Say something!' answered Cecilia sharply. 'What am I to say? I say everything to him that comes in my way.'

'I think, my dear, he is just a little inattentive. I have gone through it all, and of course know what it means. It is not that he is deficient in love, but that he allows a hundred little things to stand in his way.'

'What nonsense you do talk!'

'But, my dear, you see I have gone

through it all myself, and I do know what I am talking about.'

'Mr. Green——! Do you mean to liken Mr. Green to Sir Francis?'

'They are both gentlemen,' said Mrs. Green with a slight tone of anger. 'And though Sir Francis is a baronet, Mr. Green is a clergyman.'

'My dear Bessie, you know that is not what I meant. In that respect they are both alike. But you, when you were engaged, were about three years younger than the man, and I am nearly twenty years younger than Sir Francis. You don't suppose that I can put myself altogether on the same platform with him as you did with your lover. It is absurd to suppose it. Do you let him go his way, and me go mine. You may be sure that not a word of reproach will ever fall from my lips.'—'Till we are married,'

Cecilia had intended to say, but she did not complete the sentence.

But the words of her comforters had their effect, as no doubt was the case with Job. She had complained to no one, but everybody had seen her condition. Her poor dear old mother, who would have put up with a very moderate amount of good usage on the part of such a lover as Sir Francis, had been aware that things were not as they should be. Her three friends, to whom she had not opened her mouth in the way of expressing her grievance, had all seen her trouble. That Maude Hippesley and Miss Altifiorla had noticed it did not strike her with much surprise, but that Mrs. Green should have expressed herself so boldly was startling. She could not but turn the matter over in her own mind and ask herself whether she were ill-treated. And it was not only those

differences which the ladies noticed which struck her as ominous, but a certain way which Sir Francis had when talking to herself which troubled her. That light tone of contempt if begun now would certainly not be dropped after their marriage. He had assumed an easy way of almost laughing at her, of quizzing her pursuits, and, worse still, of only half listening to her, which she felt to promise very badly for her future happiness. If he wanted his liberty he should have it,—now and then. She would never be a drag on her husband's happiness. She had resolved from the very first not to be an exigeant wife. She would care for all his cares, but she would never be a troublesome wife. All that had been matter of deep thought to her. And if he were not given to literary tastes in earnest,—for in the first days of their love-making there had been, as

was natural, a little pretence,—she would not harass him by her pursuits. And she would sympathise with his racing and his shooting. And she would interest herself, if possible, about Newmarket,—as to which place she found he had a taste. And, joined to all the rest, there came a conviction that his real tastes did take that direction. She had never before heard that he had a passion for the turf; but if it should turn out that he was a gambler! Had any of her friends mentioned such an idea to her a week ago, how she would have rebuked that friend! But now she added this to her other grievances, and began to tell herself that she had become engaged to a man whom she did not know and whom she already doubted.

Then there came a week of very troubled existence,—of existence the more troubled because she had no one to whom to tell

her trouble. As to putting confidence in her mother,—that idea never occurred to her. Her mother among her friends was the humblest of all. To tell her mother that she was going to be married was a matter of course, but she had never consulted her mother on the subject. And now, at the end of the week, she had almost resolved to break with the man without having intimated to any one that such was her intention. And what excuse had she? There was excuse enough to her own mind, to her own heart. But what excuse could she give to him or to the world? He was confident enough,—so confident as to vex her by his confidence. Though he had come to treat her with indifference, like a plaything, she was quite sure that he did not dream of having his marriage broken off. He was secured,—she was sure that this was his feeling,—by her love, by her ambition, by his

position in the world. He could make her Lady Geraldine! Was it to be supposed that she should not wish to be Lady Geraldine? He could take what liberties he pleased without any danger of losing her! It was her conviction that such was the condition of his mind that operated the strongest in bringing her to her resolution.

But she must tell some one. She must have a confidante. 'Maude,' she said one day, 'I have made up my mind not to marry your uncle.'

'Cecilia!'

'I have. No one as yet has been told, but I have resolved. Should I see him to-morrow, or next day, or the next, I shall tell him.'

'You are not in earnest?'

'Is it likely that I should jest on such a subject;—or that if I had a mind to do so I

should tell you? You must keep my secret. You must not tell your uncle. It must come to him from myself. At the present moment he does not in the least know me,—but he will.'

'And why? Why is there to be this break;—why to be these broken promises?'

'I put it to yourself whether you do not know the why. How often have you made excuses for him? Why have the excuses been necessary? I am prepared to bear all the blame. I must bear it. But I am not prepared to make myself miserable for ever because I have made a mistake as to a man's character. Of course I shall suffer,—because I love him. He will not suffer much,—because he does not love me.'

'Oh, yes!'

'You know that he does not,' said Cecilia, shaking her head. 'You know it. You know

it. At any rate I know it. And as the thing has to be done, it shall be done quickly.' There was much more said between the two girls on the subject, but Maude when she left her friend was sure that her friend was in earnest.

CHAPTER II.

SIR FRANCIS GERALDINE.

On that same afternoon, at about tea time, Sir Francis came up to the house. He had said that he would be there if he could get there,—and he got there. He was shown into the drawing-room, where was sitting Mrs. Holt with her daughter, and began to tell them that he was to leave the Deanery on the following morning and not be back till a day or two before his marriage. 'Where are you going?' Cecilia asked, meaning nothing, only gaining time till she should have determined how she should carry out her purpose.

'Well;—if you must know, I am going to

Goodwood. I had not thought of it. But some friends have reminded me that as these are to be the last days of my liberty I may as well enjoy them.'

'Your friends are very complaisant to me,' said Cecilia in a tone of voice which seemed to imply that she took it all in earnest.

'One's friends never do care a straw for the young lady on such an occasion,' said Sir Francis. 'They regard her as the conquering enemy, and him as the conquered victim.'

'And you desire a little relaxation from your fetters.'

'Well; just a last flutter.' All this had been said with such a mixture of indifferent badinage on his part, and of serious anger on hers, that Mrs. Holt, who saw it all and understood it, sat very uneasy in her chair. 'To tell the truth,' continued he, 'all the instructions have been given to the lawyers,

and I really do think, that I had better be away during the making of the dresses and the baking of the cake. It has come to pass by this accident of my living at the Deanery that we have already become almost tired of each other's company.'

'You might speak for yourself, Sir Francis Geraldine.'

'So I do. For to tell the truth, a man does get tired of this kind of thing quicker than a woman, and a man of forty much quicker than a woman of twenty. At any rate I'm off to-morrow.'

There was something in the tone of all this which thoroughly confirmed her in her purpose. There should come an end to him of his thraldom. This should not be, by many, the last of his visits to Goodwood. He should never again have to complain of the trouble given to him by her company. She

sat silent, turning it all over in her mind, and struggling to think how she might best get her mother out of the room. She must do it instantly;—now at once. She was perfectly resolved that he should not leave that house an engaged man. But she did not see her direct way to the commencement of the difficult conversation. 'Mrs. Holt,' said Sir Francis, 'don't you think a little absence will be best for both of us, before we begin the perilous voyage of matrimony together?'

'I am sure I don't know,' said poor Mrs. Holt.

'There can't be a doubt about it,' continued the lover. 'I have become so stupid, that I hardly know how to put one foot before the other, and Cecilia is so majestical that her dignity is growing to be almost tedious.'

'Mamma,' said Cecilia after a pause, 'as Sir Francis is going to-morrow, would you mind leaving us alone for a few minutes? There is something which I have to say to him.'

Oh, certainly, my dear,' said Mrs. Holt, as she got up and left the room.

Now had come the moment, the difficult moment in which Cecilia Holt had to remodel for herself the course of her future life. For the last month or two she had been the affianced bride of a baronet, and of a man of fashion. All Exeter had known her as the future Lady Geraldine. And, more than that, she had learned to regard herself as the owner of the man, and of his future home. Her imagination had been active in drawing pictures for herself of the life she was to live,—pictures which for a time had been rosy-hued. But whatever the tints may have been, and how far the bright colours

may have become dimmed, it had been as Lady Geraldine, and not as Cecilia Holt that she had looked in the glass which had shown to herself her future career. Now, within the last four-and-twenty hours,—for the last crowning purpose of her resolution was hardly of longer date,—she had determined to alter it all. But he as yet did not know it. He still regarded her as his affianced bride. Now had come the moment in which the truth must be told to him.

As soon as her mother left the room, she got up from her seat, as did also her lover. He, as soon as the door was closed, at once attempted to put his arm round the girl's waist, as was his undoubted privilege. She with the gentlest possible motion rejected his embrace, and contrived to stand at a little distance from him. But she said nothing. The subject to be discussed was so difficult

that words would not come to her assistance. Then he lent her his aid. 'You do not mean that you're in a tiff because of what I said just now. Of course it is better that we should not be together for the few days before our marriage.'

'I do not think that I am in a tiff, Sir Francis. I hope I am not, because what I have to say is too serious for ill-humour.' Then she paused. 'What I have got to say is of some importance;—of very great importance. Sir Francis Geraldine, I feel that I have to ask you to forgive me.'

'What on earth is the matter?'

'You may well ask. And, indeed, I do not know how to excuse myself. Your friends will say that I am frivolous, and vain, and discontented.'

'What the mischief is it all about?' he demanded with an angry voice.

She knew she had not as yet told him. She could perceive that he had not gathered from her first words any inkling of the truth; and yet she did not know how to tell him. If it were once told she could, she thought, defend herself. But the difficulty was to find the words by which she could let him know what was her intention. 'Sir Francis, I fear that we have misunderstood each other.'

'How misunderstood? Why Sir Francis? Am I to understand that you want to quarrel with me because I am going away? If so speak it out. I shall go just the same.'

'Your going has no bearing upon my present purpose. I had made up my mind before I had heard of your going;—only when I did hear of it it became necessary that I should tell you at once.'

'But you have told me nothing. I hate mysteries, and secrets, and scenes. There is

nothing goes against the grain so much with me as tragedy airs. If you have done anything amiss that it is necessary that I should know let me know it at once.' As he said this there came across his brow a look of anger and of hot ill-humour, such as she had never seen there before. The effect was to induce her to respect him rather than to be afraid of him. It was well that a man should have the power and the courage to show his anger.

But it encouraged her to proceed with her task. She certainly was not afraid of him personally, though she did dread what the world might say of her, and especially what might be said by his friends. 'I do not know that I have done anything amiss of which I need tell you,' she said with quiet dignity. 'It is rather that which I intend to do. I fear, Sir Francis, that you and I have made a mistake in this.'

'What mistake?' he shouted. 'While you beat about the bush I shall never understand you.'

'In our proposed marriage.'

'What?'

'I fear that I should not make you happy.'

'What on earth do you mean?' Then he paused a moment before he continued, which he did as though he had discovered suddenly the whole secret. 'You have got another lover.'

There was something in the idea so shocking to Cecilia, so revolting,—so vulgar in the mode of expression, that the feeling at once gave her the strength necessary to go on with her task. She would not condescend to answer the accusation, but at once told her story in plain language. 'I think, Sir Francis Geraldine, that you do not feel for me the regard that would make me happy as your wife. Do

not interrupt me just at present,' she said, stopping him, as some exclamation was escaping from his lips. 'Hear me to the end, and, if you have ought to say, I will then hear you. Of my own regard for you I will say nothing. But I think that I have been mistaken as to your nature. In fact, I feel sure that we are neither of us that which the other supposed. It is lamentable that we should have fallen into such an error, but it is well that even yet we can escape from it before it is too late. As my mind is altogether made up, I can only ask your pardon for what I have done to you, expressing myself sure at the same time that I am now best consulting your future happiness.'

During this last speech of Cecilia's, Sir Francis had sat down, while she still stood in her old place. He had seated himself on the sofa, assuming as it were a look of profound ease, and arranging the nails of one hand with

the fingers of the other, as though he were completely indifferent to the words spoken to him. 'Have you done yet?' he said as soon as she was silent.

'Yes, I have done.'

'And you are sure that if I begin you will not interrupt me till I have done?'

'I think not,—if there be ought that you have to say.'

'Well, considering that ten minutes since I was engaged to make you Lady Geraldine, and that I am now supposed to be absolved from any such necessity, I presume you will think it expedient that I should say something. I suppose that I have not been told the whole truth.' Then he stopped, as though in spite of his injunction as to her silence he expected an answer from her. But she made none, though there came a cloud of anger upon her face. 'I suppose,

I say, that there is something of which it is not considered necessary that I should be informed. There must be something of the kind, or you would hardly abandon prospects which a few days since appeared to you to be so desirable.'

'I have not thought it necessary to speak of your temper,' she said.

'Nor of your own.'

'Nor of my own,' she added.

'But there is, I take it, something beyond that. I do not think that my temper, bad as it may be,—nor your own,—would have sufficed to estrange you. There must be something more palpable than temper to have occasioned it. And though you have not thought fit to tell me, you must feel that my position justifies me in asking. Have you another lover?'

'No,' she exclaimed, burning with wrath

but with head so turned from him that he should not see her.

'Nor have ever had one? I am entitled to ask the question, though perhaps I should have asked it before.'

'You are at any rate not entitled to ask it now. Sir Francis Geraldine, between you and me all is over. I can only beg you to understand most positively that all is over.'

'My dear Miss Holt, you need not insist upon that, as it is perfectly understood.'

'Then there need be no further words. If I have done you any wrong I ask your pardon. You have wronged me only in your thoughts. I must take what consolation I can from the feeling that the injury will fall chiefly upon my head and not upon yours.' Then without a further word of farewell she marched out of the room.

Sir Francis, when he found himself alone,

shook himself, as it were, as he rose from the sofa, and looked about the room in amazement. It was quite true that she was gone—gone, as far as he was concerned, for ever. It did not occur to him for a moment that there could be any reconciliation between them, and his first feeling undoubtedly was one of amazed disappointment. Then, standing there in Mrs. Holt's drawing-room, he began to bethink himself what could have been the cause of it. Since the first week of his engagement he had begun and had continued to tell himself what great things he was about to do for Cecilia Holt. With her beauty, her grace, her dignity, and her accomplishments he was quite satisfied. It was expedient that he should marry, and he did not know that he could marry much better. Cecilia, when her mother died, would have twenty thousand pounds, and that in his eyes

had been sufficient. But he was about to make her Lady Geraldine, and the more that he thought of this, the more grateful it had appeared to him that she should be to him. Then by degrees, while he had expected from her expressions of gratitude, she had rebelled against him! Of the meaning of this he had not been quite conscious, but had nevertheless felt it necessary that he should dominate her spirit. Up to the moment in which this interview had begun he had thought that he was learning to do so. She had not dared to ask him questions which would have been so natural, or to demand from him services to which she was entitled. It was thus that he had regarded her conduct. But he had never feared for a moment but that he was on the road to success. Up to the moment at which he had entered the room he had thought that he was progressing

favourably. His Cecilia was becoming tame in his hands, as was necessary. He had then been altogether taken aback and surprised by her statement to him, and could not for some moments get over his feeling of amazement. At last he uttered a low whistle, and then walked slowly out of the house. At the front door he found his horse, and, mounting it, rode back into Exeter. As he did so he began to inquire of himself whether this step which the girl had determined to take was really a misfortune to him or the reverse. He had hardly as yet asked himself any such question since the day on which he had first become engaged to her. He had long thought of marrying, and one girl after another had been rejected by him as he had passed them in review through his thoughts. Then had come Cecilia's turn, and she had seemed to answer the purpose. There had been about her an

especial dignity which had suited his views of matrimonial life. She was a young woman as to whom all his friends would say that he had done well in marrying her. But by degrees there had come upon him a feeling of the general encumbrance of a wife. Would she not interfere with him? Would she not wish to hinder him when he chose to lead a bachelor's life? Newmarket for instance, and his London clubs, and his fishing in Norway, —would she not endeavour to set her foot upon them? Would it not be well that he should teach her that she would not be allowed to interfere? He had therefore begun to teach her,—and this had come of it! It had been quite unexpected, but still he felt as though he were released from a burden.

He had accused her of having had another lover. At the moment an idea had passed through his mind that she was suddenly

prompted by her conscience to tell him something that she had hitherto concealed. There had been some lover, probably, as to whom everyone had been silent to him. He was a jealous man, and for a moment he had been hurt. He would have said that his heart had been hurt. There was but little of heart in it, for it may be doubted whether he had ever loved her. But there was something pricked him which filled him for the instant with serious thoughts. When he had asked the question he wished to see her at his feet. There had come no answer, and he told himself that he was justified in thinking the surmise to be true. He was justified to himself, but only for the moment, for at the next had come her declaration that all was to be over between them. The idea of the lover became buried under the ruins which were thus made.

So she intended to escape from him! But he also would escape from her. After all, what an infinite trouble would a wife be to him,—especially a wife of whose docility in harness he was not quite assured. But there came upon him as he rode home an idea that the world would say that he had been jilted. Of course he would have been jilted, but there would be nothing in that except as the world might speak of it. It was gall to him to have to think that the world of Exeter should believe that Cecilia Holt had changed her mind, and had sent him about his business. If the world of Exeter would say that he had ill-used the girl, and had broken off the engagement for mere fancy,—as she had done,—that would be much more endurable. He could not say that such was the case. To so palpable a lie the contradiction would be easy and disgraceful. But

could he not so tell the story as to leave a doubt on the minds of the people? That question of another lover had not been contradicted. Thinking of it again as he rode home he began to feel that the lover must be true, and that her conduct in breaking off the engagement had been the consequence. There had been some complication in the way of which she had been unable to rid herself. At any rate it was quite out of the question that he should have held himself to such an engagement, complicated as it would have been with such a lover. There would be some truth, therefore, in so telling the story as to leave the matter in doubt, and in doubt he resolved that he would leave it. Before he got back to the Deanery he was, he thought, thoroughly glad that he should have been enabled so easily to slip his neck out of the collar.

CHAPTER III.

THE END OF THAT EPISODE.

Cecilia during the following day told no one what had occurred, nor on the morning of the next. Indeed she did not open her mouth on the subject till Maude Hippesley came to her. She felt that she was doing wrong to her mother by keeping her in the dark, but she could not bring herself to tell it. She had, as she now declared to herself, settled the question of her future life. To live with her mother,—and then to live alone, must be her lot. She had been accustomed, before the coming of Sir Francis, to speak of this as a thing certain; but then it had not been

certain, had not been probable, even to her own mind. Of course lovers would come till the acceptable lover should be accepted. The threats of a single life made by pretty girls with good fortunes never go for much in this world. Then in due time the acceptable lover had come, and had been accepted.

And to what purpose had she put him? She could not even now say of what she accused him, having rejected him. What excuse could she give? What answer could she allege? She was more sure than ever now that she could not live with him as his wife. He had said words about some former lover which were not the less painful, in that there had been no foundation for them. There had in truth been nothing for her to tell Sir Francis Geraldine. Out of her milk-white innocency no confession was to be made. But what there was had all been laid bare to

him. There had been no lover,—but if there had, then there would have been a lie told. She had said that there had been none, and he had heard her assertion with those greedy ears which men sometimes have for such telling. It was a comfort to him that there had been none; and when something uncomfortable came in his way he immediately thought that she had deceived him. She must bear with all that now. It did not much matter, she assured herself, what he might think of her. But for the moment she could hardly endure to think of it, much less to talk of it. She did not know how to own to her mother that she was simply a jilt without offering anything in excuse. The truth must be told, but, oh, how bitter must the truth be! Even that accusation as to the lover had not been made till after she had resolved to reject him; and she could not

bring herself to lie to her mother by pretending that the one had caused the other.

After lunch on the second day Maude Hippesley came down and found her amongst the trees in the shrubbery. It will be remembered that Maude was niece to Sir Francis, and was at the present time living in the same house with him. 'Cecilia,' she said, 'what is this that has happened?'

'He has told you then?'

'What is it? He has told us all that you have quarrelled, and now he has gone away.'

'Thank God for that!'

'Yes;—he has gone. But he told us only just as he went. And he has made a mystery of it,—so that I do not know how it has happened,—or why.'

'Did I not tell you?'

'Yes;—you told me something—some-

thing that made me think you mad. But it is he that has rejected you now!'

'Has he told you that?'

'He has told us all so, just as he was leaving us. After his things were packed up he told us.' Cecilia stood still and looked into her friend's face. Maude she knew could say nothing to her that was not true. 'He has made a mystery of it, but that has been the impression he has left upon us. At any rate there has been a quarrel.'

'Yes;—there has been a quarrel.'

'And now our only business is to make it up. It is impossible that two people who have loved each other as you have done should be allowed to part in so absurd a manner. It is like two children who think they are never to be friends again because of some momentary disagreement.' Maude Hippesley, who had not lived in the same town with her lover and

therefore had never quarrelled with him, was awfully wise. 'It is quite out of the question,' she continued, 'that this thing should go on. I don't think it matters in the least whether you quarrel with him or he with you. But of course you must make it up. And as you are the woman it is only proper that you should begin.'

How much had Cecilia to do before she could prove to her friend that no such beginning was possible. In the first place there was the falsehood, the base falsehood, which Sir Francis had told. In order to save himself he had declared that he had rejected her. It was very mean. At this moment its peculiar meanness made her feel doubly sure that the man was altogether unfitted to be her husband. But she would allow the false assertion to pass unnoticed. If he could find a comfort in that let him have it. Per-

haps upon the whole it would be better that some such story should go forth in Exeter. It could not be told by her because it was untrue; but for the moment she thought that she might pass it by without notice. 'There can be no fresh beginning,' she said. 'We two have already come to the end of all that is likely to take place between us. Dear Maude, pray do not trouble me. No doubt as time goes by we shall talk of it all again. But just at present, circumstanced as you are with him, nothing but silence between you and me can be fitting. I hope that you and I at any rate will never quarrel.'

After that she told her mother and her two other friends. Her mother was for a week or two in despair. She endeavoured by means of the family at the Deanery to bring about some reconciliation. The Dean, who did not in truth like his brother-in-law and

was a little afraid of him, altogether refused to interfere in the matter. Mrs. Hippesley was of opinion that the lovers would be sure to 'come round' if left to themselves. Maude who, though she had not liked her uncle, had thought much of his position, and had been proud of the idea that he should marry an Exeter girl and her own peculiar friend, was in despair. But the Deanery collectively refused to take active steps in the matter. Mrs. Green was of opinion that Cecilia must have behaved badly. There had been some affair of pride in which she had declined to give way. According to Mrs. Green's ideas a woman could hardly yield too much to a man before marriage, so as to secure him, in order that her time for management might come afterwards. With Miss Altifiorla, Cecilia found for awhile more comfort; but even from this noted hater of the other sex the comfort was not exactly of

the kind she wanted. Miss Altifiorla was of opinion that men on the whole are bad, but seemed to think that among men this baronet was not a bad specimen. He did not want a great deal of attention and was fairly able to get about by himself without calling upon his future wife to be always with him. Then he had a title and an income and a house; and was in short one of those who are in a measure compelled to marry. Miss Altifiorla thought it a pity that the match should be broken off, but was quite ready to console her friend as to the misfortune.

There was one point as to which Cecilia was quite decided, and in this Miss Altifiorla bore her out altogether. That question of marriage was now settled once and for ever. Cecilia, much in opposition to her friend's wishes, had tried her hand at it and had failed. She had fallen grievously to the ground and

had bruised herself dreadfully in making the attempt. It had perhaps been necessary, as Miss Altifiorla thought. It is not given to all to know their own strength as it had been given to her. They had often discussed these matters, and Miss Altifiorla had always been very firm. So had Cecilia been firm; but then she had given way, had broken down, had consented to regard herself as a mere woman and no stronger than other women. She had given herself to a man in order that she might be the mother of his children and the head servant in his household. She had shown herself to be false for the moment to her great principles. But Providence had intervened. It may be surmised that Miss Altifiorla in discussing the matter with herself did not use the word Providence. Nor was it Chance. And as the rejection had come from the gentleman's hands,—so Miss Alti-

fiorla was taught to believe,—she could not boast that Cecilia had accomplished it. But some mysterious agency had been at work which would not permit so exceptional a young lady as Miss Holt to fall into the common quagmire of marriage. She had escaped,—thanks to the mysterious agency, and must be doubly, trebly, armed with resolution lest she should stumble again. 'I think,' she said one day to Cecilia, 'I think that you have great cause to be thankful that he should have repented of his bargain before it was too late.'

Flesh is flesh after all and human nature no stronger than human nature. Cecilia had consented to bear in silence the idea that she had been jilted, and had endured her mother's tender little sympathies on the subject. But there was a difficulty to her in suffering this direct statement from her friend. Why would

not her friend let the matter be passed by in silence? 'It is well,' she said, 'that we both repented.'

Now the subject had been much discussed in Exeter—whether Sir Francis had jilted Miss Holt or Miss Holt Sir Francis. It had been always present to Miss Hippesley's mind, that her friend had told her of her intention at a time when she was quite sure that Sir Francis had no such notion in his head. And when, on the day but one following, she had told Cecilia of the statement which Sir Francis had made at the Deanery, Cecilia had not contradicted it, but had expressed her surprise. She therefore had resolved to decide the question against her uncle, and had given rise to the party who were on that side. But the outside world were strongly of opinion that Sir Francis had been the first offender. It was so much the more

probable. Miss Altifiorla had always taken that side, and had spoken everywhere of him as the great sinner. Still however there was a doubt in her own mind, as to which she was desirous of receiving such solution as Cecilia could give her. She was determined now to push the question. 'But,' said she, 'I suppose it originated with him? It is a great thing for us to feel that you have not been to blame at all in the matter.'

'I have been to blame,' said Cecilia.

'But how? The man comes here and proposes himself; and is accepted, and then breaks away from his engagement without reason and without excuse. It is a thing to be thankful for, that he should have done so; but we have also to be thankful that the fault has not been on our side.' Miss Altifiorla had almost brought herself to believe that the man had made love to her, and proposed

to her, that she in a moment of weakness had accepted him, and that she now had been luckily saved by his inconstancy.

'I think we will drop that part of the question,' said Miss Holt, showing by her manner that she did not choose to be cross-questioned. 'In such cases there is generally fault on both sides.' Then there was nothing further said on the subject, but Miss Altifiorla pondered much over her friend's weakness in not being able to confess that she had been jilted.

All this had happened in the summer. During the gala days of the projected wedding plans had been made, of course, for the honeymoon. Sir Francis with his bride were to go here and to go there, and poor Mrs. Holt had been fated to remain at home as though no arrangement had been necessary for her happiness. Indeed none had been

necessary. She was quite content to remain at Exeter and expect such excitement as might come to her from letters from Lady Geraldine. To talk to everybody around her about Lady Geraldine would have sufficed for her. And when all these hopes were broken up and it had been really decided that there should be no wedding, when it became apparent that Cecilia Holt was to remain as Cecilia Holt, still there was no autumn tour. Cecilia had declared that in no place would life be so quiet for her as at home. 'Mamma,' she had said, 'let us prepare ourselves for what is to come. You and I mean to live together happily, and our life must be a home life!' Then she applied herself specially to the flowers and the shrubs, and began even to look after the vegetables in the fulness of her energy. In these days she did not see much of her three friends. In

August Maude was married and became Mrs. Thorne. Mr. Thorne was the eldest son of a Squire from Honiton for whom things were to be made modestly comfortable during his father's life. Maude's coming marriage had not been counted as much during the days of her friend's high hopes, but had risen in consideration since the fall which had taken place. Between Miss Altifiorla and Cecilia there had come, not a quarrel, but a coolness. The two ladies did continue to see each other occasionally, but there was but little between them to console misery. Miss Altifiorla had attempted to resume her position of equality,—unreasoned and imaginary equality,—with perhaps a slight step in advance to which in their present circumstances she was entitled by their age. Cecilia cared nothing for equality, but would not consent to be held to have lost anything.

Though Miss Altifiorla declared that her friend had risen very highly in her sentiments, there was too evidently a depreciation in her manner; and this Cecilia could not endure. Consequently the two ladies were not, at this period, of much comfort one to the other. With Mrs. Green matters might have been different; but Mrs. Green too manifestly thought that Cecilia had been wrong, and still clung to the idea that with proper management the baronet might be made to come back again. With a lady holding such ideas as these there could be no sympathy.

In owning the truth it must be confessed that Cecilia at this period of her life was too self-conscious. She did not think, but felt, that the world all around her was suffused by a Holt-Geraldine aspect and flavour. She could not walk abroad without an idea that

the people whom she saw were talking about her. She could not shut herself in her garden without a conviction that the passers-by were saying that the girl living there had been jilted by Sir Francis Geraldine. She had been well aware of the greatness of the position in which she was to have been placed; and though she had abandoned the situation without a doubt as soon as she had learned her mistake as to the man's character, still she felt the fall, and inwardly grieved over it. She had not known herself at first, —how grievous would be her isolation when she found herself alone. Such was the case with her now, so that she fretted and made herself ill. By degrees she confined herself more and more to the house, till her mother seeing it, interfered. She became sick, captious, and querulous. The old family doctor

interfered and advised that she should be taken away from Exeter. 'For ever?' asked Mrs. Holt. The doctor did not say for ever. Mrs. Holt might probably be able to let the house for a year and go elsewhere for that period. Then there arose questions as to all the pretty furniture, and their household gods. Cecilia herself was most unwilling. But before Christmas came, arrangements had been made, and the house was let, and the first of January saw Mrs. Holt and her daughter comfortably established in a pension at Nice. Mrs. Holt at any rate declared that she was comfortable, though Cecilia on her mother's behalf stated it to be impossible. She herself told herself,—though she had whispered no word on the subject to living ears,—she herself told herself that she had been driven abroad by the

falsehood which Sir Francis had told. She could not bear to live in Exeter as the girl that had been jilted.

This is the episode in the life of Cecilia Holt which it is necessary should be first told.

CHAPTER IV.

MR. WESTERN.

THE Holts travelled about during the whole of that year, passing the summer in Switzerland and the autumn in the north of Italy, and found themselves at Rome in November, with the intention of remaining there for the winter. One place was the same to them as another, and it was necessary that they should at any rate exist until the term had expired for which they had let their house. Mrs. Holt had I think enjoyed her life. She had been made more of than at home, and had been happy amidst the excitement. But with Cecilia it had been for many months as though all things had been made of

leather and prunello. She had not cared, or had not seemed to care, for scenery or for cities. In that last episode of her life she had aspired to a new career, and had at first been fairly successful. And she had loved the man honestly for a time, and had buoyed herself up with great intentions as to the future duties of her life. Then had come her downfall, in which it was commonly said of her that she had been jilted by her lover. Even when the mountains of Switzerland had been so fine before her eyes as in truth to console her by their beauty, she had not admitted that she was consoled. The Campanile at Florence had filled her with that satisfaction which comes from supreme beauty. But still when she went home to her hotel she thought more of Sir Francis Geraldine than of the Campanile. To have been jilted would be bad, but to have it said of her that she had been jilted when she was conscious that it was

untrue was a sore provocation. And yet no one could say but that she had behaved well and been instigated by good motives. She had found that her lover was ignoble, and did not love her. And she had at once separated herself from him. And, since that, in all her correspondence with her friends she had quietly endured the idea which would continually crop up that she had been jilted. She never denied it; but it was the false accusation rather than the loss of all that her marriage had promised her which made her feel the Matterhorn and the Campanile to be equally ineffective. Then there gradually came to her some comfort from a source from which she had certainly not expected it. On their travels they had become acquainted with a Mr. Western, a silent, shy, almost middle-aged man, whom they had sat next to at dinner for nearly a week before they had become acquainted with him. But they

had passed on from scenery to city, and, as had been their fortune, Mr. Western had passed on with them. Who does not know the way in which some strange traveller becomes his friend on a second or a third meeting in some station or hotel saloon? In this way Mrs. Holt and Cecilia had become acquainted with Mr. Western, and on parting with him at Venice in October had received with gratification the assurance that he would again 'turn up' in Rome.

'He is a very good sort of man,' said Mrs. Holt to her daughter that night. Cecilia agreed, but with perhaps less enthusiasm than her mother had displayed. For Mrs. Holt the assertion had been quite enthusiastic. But Cecilia did think that Mr. Western had made himself agreeable. He was an unmarried man, however, and there had been something in the nature of a communication which he had made

to her, that had prevented her from being loud in his praise. Not that the communication had been one which had in any way given offence; but it had been unexpected, confidential, and of such a nature as to create much thought. No doubt an intimacy had sprung up between them. But yet it was singular that a man apparently so reticent as Mr. Western should make such a communication. How the intimacy had grown by degrees need not here be explained, but that it had grown to be very close will appear from the nature of the story told.

The story was one of Mr. Western's own life and was as follows. He was a man of good but not of large fortune. He had been to Oxford and had there distinguished himself. He had been called to the bar but had not practised. He had gone into Parliament, but had left it, finding that the benches of the House of Commons were only fitted for the waste of

time. He had joined scientific societies to which he still belonged, but which he did not find to be sufficient for his happiness. During these attempts and changes he had taken a house in London, and having a house had thought it well to look for a wife. He had become engaged to a certain Miss Mary Tremenhere, and by her he had been—jilted. Since that, for twelve months he had been travelling abroad in quest, he said, not of consolation, but of some mitigation of his woe. Cecilia, when she heard this, whispered to him one little question, 'Do you love her?' 'I thought I did,' he answered. And then the subject was dropped.

It was a most singular communication for him to make. Why should he, an elderly man as she at first took him to be, select her as the recipient for such a tale? She took him to be an elderly man, till she found by the accidents of conversation that he was two years younger

than Sir Francis Geraldine. Then she looked into his face and saw that that appearance of age had come upon him from sorrow. There was a tinge of grey through his hair, and there were settled lines about his face, and a look of steadied thought about his mouth, which robbed him of all youth. But when she observed his upright form, and perceived that he was a strong stalwart man, in the very pride of manhood as far as strength was concerned,—then she felt that she had wronged him. Still he was one who had suffered so much as to be entitled to be called old. She felt the impossibility of putting him in the same category among men as that filled by Sir Francis Geraldine. The strength of manhood was still there, but not the salt of youth. But why should he have told her, —her who had exactly the same story to tell back again, if only she could tell it? Once or twice there came to her an idea that she would

tell it. He had sought for sympathy, not under the assurance of secrecy but with the full conviction, as she felt it, that his secret would be safe. Why should not she do the same? That there would be great comfort in doing so she was well aware. To have some one who would sympathise with her! Hitherto she had no one. Even her mother, who was kindness, even obedience itself, who attended to her smallest wish, even her mother regretted the baronet son-in-law. 'And yet she would have been left all alone,' she said to herself, marvelling at the unselfish fondness of a mother. Mr. Western would be bound to sympathise. Having called upon her for sympathy, his must be ready. But when she had thought of it thrice she did not do it. Were she to tell her story it would seem as though she were repeating to him back his own. 'I too have been in love, and engaged, and have jilted a gentleman considerably my

senior in age.' She would have to say that, likening herself to the girl who had jilted him, —or else to tell the other story, the untrue story, the story which the world believed, in order that she might be on a par with him. This she could not do. If she told any she must tell the truth, and the truth was not suitable to be told. Therefore she kept her peace, and sympathised with a one-sided sympathy.

In Rome they did again meet, and on this occasion they met as quite old friends. He called upon them at their hotel and sat with them, happier than usual in his manner, and, for him, almost light and gay of heart. Parties were made to St. Peter's, and the Coliseum, and the Capitol. When he left on that occasion Cecilia remarked to her mother how much less triste he was than usual. 'Men, I suppose,' she said to herself, 'get over that kind of thing quicker than women.'

In Rome it seemed to Cecilia that Mr. Western, when alone with her, had no other subject for conversation than the ill-treatment he had received from Mary Tremenhere. His eagerness in coming back to the subject quite surprised her. She herself was fascinated by it, but yet felt it would be better were she to put a stop to it. There was no way of doing this unless she were to take her mother from Rome. She could not tell him that on that matter he had said enough, nor could she warn him that so much of confidential intercourse between them would give rise in the minds of others to erroneous ideas. Her mother never seemed to see that there was anything peculiar in their intercourse. And so it went on from day to day and from week to week.

'You asked me once whether I loved her,' he said one day. 'I did; but I am astonished

now that it should have been so. She was very lovely.'

'I suppose so.'

'The most perfect complexion that was ever seen on a lady's cheek.' Cecilia remembered that her complexion too had been praised before this blow had fallen upon her. 'The colour would come and go so rapidly that I used to marvel what were the thoughts that drove the blood hither and thither. There were no thoughts,—unless of her own prettiness and her own fortunes. She accepted me as a husband because it was necessary for her to settle in life. I was in Parliament, and that she thought to be something. I had a house in Chester Square, and that was something. She was promised a carriage, and that conquered her. As the bride I had chosen for myself she became known to many, and then she began to understand that she might have done better

with herself. I am old, and not given to many amusements. Then came a man with a better income and with fewer years; and she did not hesitate for a moment. When she took me aside and told me that she had changed her mind, it was her quiescence and indifference that disturbed me most. There was nothing of her new lover; but simply that she did not love me. I did not stoop for a moment to a prayer. I took her at her word, and left her. Within a week she was acknowledged to be engaged to Captain Geraldine.'

The naming of the name of course struck Cecilia Holt. She remembered to have heard something of the coming marriage by her lover's cousin, and something, too, of the story of the girl. But it had reached her ear in the lightest form; and had hardly remained in her memory. It was now of no matter, as she had determined to keep her

own history to herself. Therefore she made no exclamation when the name of Geraldine was mentioned.

'How could I love her after that?' he continued, betraying the strong passion which he felt. 'I had loved a girl whose existence I had imagined, and of whom I had seen merely the outward form, and had known nothing of the inner self. What is it that we love?' he continued. 'Is it merely the coloured doll, soft to touch and pleasant to kiss? Or is it some inner nature which we hope to discover, and of which we have found the outside so attractive? I had found no inner self which it had been possible that I could love. He was welcome to the mere doll who was wanted simply that she should grace his equipage. I have asked myself, Why is it that I am so sorely driven, seeing that in truth I do not love her? I would not have

her now for all the world. I know well how providential has been my escape. And yet I go about like a wounded animal, who can find none to consort with him. Till I met you, and learnt to talk to you, I was truly miserable. And why? Because I had been saved from falling when standing on a precipice! Because the engine had not been allowed to crush me when passing along on its iron road! Ought I not to rejoice and be thankful rather, as I think of what I have escaped? But in truth it is the poor weakness of human nature. People say that I have been—jilted. What matters it to me what people say? I have been saved, and as time goes on I shall know it and be thankful.'

Every word of it came home to her and gave her back her own story. There was her own soreness, and her own salvation. There

was the remembrance of what the people in Exeter were saying of her, only slightly relieved by the conviction that she had been preserved from a life of unhappiness. But she had never been able to look at it quite as he did. He knew that the better thing had happened to him; but she, though she knew it also, was sore at heart because people told the story, as she thought, to her discredit. There was, indeed, this difference between them. It was said truly of him that the girl had jilted him, but falsely of her that she had been jilted.

She, however, told him nothing of her own life. There had come moments in which she was sorely tempted. But she had allowed them to pass by, telling herself on each occasion that this at any rate was not the moment. She could not do it now,—or now,— or now, lest there should seem to be some peculiar

motive on her own part. And so the matter went on till there had arisen a feeling of free confidence on the one side, and of absolute restraint on the other. She could not do it, she said to herself. Much as she trusted Mr. Western, deeply as she regarded him as her friend, strongly as she wished that the story had been told to him at some former passage of their intimacy, the proper time had passed by, she said, and he must be left in his ignorance.

Then one day there happened that which the outside world at Rome had long expected; and among the number Mrs. Holt. George Western proposed to marry Cecilia Holt. Of all the world at Rome who had watched the two together she probably was the last who thought of any such idea. But even to her the idea must surely have come in some shape before the proposal. He had

allowed her to feel that he was only happy in her company, and he had gradually fallen into the habit of confiding to her in everything. He had told her of his money, and of his future life. He had consulted her about his books, and pictures he had bought, and even about the servants of his establishment. She cannot but have expected it. But yet when the moment came she was unable to give him an answer.

It was not that she did not think that she liked him. She had been surprised to find how fond she had gradually become of him; —how Sir Francis had faded in her memory, and had become a poor washed-out daub of a man while this other had grown into the proportions of a hero. She did not declare to herself that she loved him, but she was sure that she could do so. But two reasons did for a while make her feel that

she could not accept him. The one was weak as water, but still it operated with her. Since she had been abroad she had corresponded regularly with Miss Altifiorla, and Miss Altifiorla in her letters had been very strong in her aversion to matrimony. Many things had been said apparently with the intention of comforting Cecilia, but written in truth with the view of defending herself. 'I have chosen the better side, and have been true to it without danger of stumbling.' So it was that Miss Altifiorla put it. 'You, dearest Cecilia, have had an accident, but have recovered and stand once more upon the solid ground. Take care, oh, take care, that you do not fall!' Cecilia did not remember that any chance of stumbling had come in Miss Altifiorla's way; and was upon the whole disgusted by the constancy of her friend's arguments. But still they did

weigh, and drove her to ask herself whether, in truth, an unmarried life was not the safer for a woman. But the cause which operated the strongest with her was the silence which she had herself maintained. There was indeed no reason why she should not at once begin and tell her story. But in doing so it would appear that she had been induced to do it only by Mr. Western's offer. And she cheated herself by some vague idea that she would be telling the secrets of another person. 'Had it been for myself only,' she said to herself, 'I would have done it long since. But that which made it improper then would make it still more improper now.' And so she held her peace and told Mr. Western nothing of the story.

He came to her the day after his offer and demanded her answer. But she was not as yet able to give it to him. She had in the

meantime told her mother, and had received from her that ready, willing, quick assurance of her sanction which was sure to operate in a different way than that intended. Her mother was thinking only of her material interests,—of a comfortable house and a steady, well-to-do life's companion. Of what more should she have thought? the reader will say. But Cecilia had still in her head undefined, vague notions of something which might be better than that,—of some companion who might be better than the companions which other girls generally choose for themselves. She dreamed of some one who should sit with her during the long mornings and read Dante to her,—when she should have taught herself to understand it; of some one with a hidden nobility of character which should be all but divine. Her invectives against matrimony had all

come from a fear lest the man with the hidden nobility should not be forthcoming. She had tried, or had nearly tried, Sir Francis Geraldine, and had made one hideous mistake. Was or was not this Mr. Western a man with all such hidden nobility? If so she thought that she might love him.

She required a week, and gave her whole thoughts to the object. Should she or should she not abandon that mode of life to which she had certainly pledged herself? In the first days of the misery created by the Geraldine disruption she had declared that she would never more open her ears or her heart to matrimonial projects. The promise had only been made to Miss Altifiorla,—to Miss Altifiorla and to herself. At the present moment she did not greatly regard Miss Altifiorla;—but the promise made to herself and corroborated by her assurance

to another, almost overcame her. And then there was that story which she could not now tell to Mr. Western. She could not say to him:—'Yes, I will accept you, but you must first hear my tale;' and then tell him the exact copy of his own to her. And yet it was necessary that he should know. The time must come,—some day. Alas! she did not remember that no day could be less painful,—less disagreeable than the present. If he did not like the story now he could tell her so, and have done with it. There could be no fault found with her. It had hitherto been free to her to tell it or not as she pleased. 'I had not meant to have disclosed my secret, but now it is necessary.' Even had he fancied that she had 'invented it' in part and made it like to his own, no harm,—no dangerous harm would come from that. He could but be angry and

recede from his offer. But she found that she did not wish him to recede. Her objections to matrimony had all been cured. She told herself at the last moment that she was not able to undergo the absurdity of such a revelation,—and she accepted him.

CHAPTER V.

CECILIA'S SECOND CHANCE.

It became at once necessary that Mr. Western should start off for London. That had been already explained. He would go, whether accepted or refused. When she had named a week, he had told her that he should only have just time to wait for her reply. She offered to be ready in five days, but he would not hurry her. During the week she had hardly seen him, but she was aware that he remained silent, moody, almost sullen. She was somewhat afraid of his temper;—but yet she had found him in other respects so open, so noble, so con-

sistent! 'It shall be so,' she said, putting her hand into his. Then his very nature seemed to have changed. It appeared as though nothing could restrain him in the expression of his satisfaction. Nothing could be more quietly joyous than his manner. He was to have left Rome by a mid-day train, but he would wait for a train at midnight in order that he might once dine with his own wife that was to be. 'You will kill yourself with the fatigue,' Cecilia said. But he laughed at her. It was not so easy to kill him. Then he sat with her through the long morning, telling her of the doings of his past life, and his schemes for the life to come. He had a great book which he wanted to write,—as to which everybody might laugh at him but she must not laugh. He laughed at himself and his aspiration; but she promised all her sym-

pathy, and she told him of their house at Exeter, and of her mother's future loneliness. He would do anything for her within his power. Her mother should live with them if she wished it. And she spoke of the money which was to be her own, and told him of the offer which her mother had made as to giving up a portion of it. Of this he would have none. And he told her how it must be settled. And he behaved just as a lover should do,—taking upon himself to give directions, but giving all the directions just such as she would have them.

Then he went; and there came upon her a cold, chilling feeling that she had already been untrue to him. It was a feeling as to which she could not speak, even to her mother. But why had not her mother advised her and urged her to tell him everything? Her mother had said not a word to her about it. Why did her

mother treat her as though she were one to be feared, and beyond the possibility of advice? But to her mother she said not a word on the subject. From the moment in which Mr. Western had first begun to pay her attention, the name of Sir Francis had never been mentioned between the mother and daughter. And now in all their intercourse Mrs. Holt spoke with an unclouded serenity of their future life. It was to her as though the Geraldine episode had been absolutely obliterated from the memory of them all. Mr. Western to her was everything. She would not accept his magnificent offer of a home, because she knew that an old woman in a man's house could only be considered as in his way. She would divide her income, and give at any rate a third to her daughter. And she did bestow much advice as to the manner in which everything

should be done so as to tend to his happiness. His tastes should be adopted, and his ways of life should be studied. His pursuits should be made her pursuits, and his friends her friends. All this was very well. Cecilia knew all that without any teaching from her mother. Her instincts told her as much as that. But what was she to do with this secret which loaded her bosom, but as to which she could not bring herself even to ask her mother's advice?

Then she made up her mind that she would write to her lover and relate the whole story as to Sir Francis Geraldine. And she did write it; but she was alarmed at finding that the story, when told, extended itself over various sheets of paper. And the story would take the shape of a confession,—as though she were telling her lover of some passage in her life of which she had cause to be ashamed. She knew that there was no ground for

shame. She had done nothing which she ought not to have done, nothing which she could not have acknowledged to him without a blush. When the letter was completed, she found it to be one which she could not send. It was as though she were telling him something, on reading which he would have to decide whether their engagement should or should not be continued. This was not at all her purpose. Thinking of it all with a view to his happiness, and to his honour, she did not wish him to suppose that there could be a doubt on that subject. It was clear to her that a letter so worded was not fit for the occasion, and she destroyed it. Still she was minded to write to him, but for the moment she postponed her purpose. Of course she wrote to her friends in Exeter. Were she to be silent to them it would appear as though she were ashamed of what she was

now doing. She told Maude Hippesley,—or Mrs. Thorne as she was now called; and she told Mrs. Green, and also Miss Altifiorla. Immediate answers came from the three. Those from the two married ladies were in all respects satisfactory. That from Mrs. Thorne was quite enthusiastic in its praises of matrimony. That from Mrs. Green was a little less warm, but was still discreetly happy. She had no doubt in her own mind that a married life was preferable, and that Mr. Western, though perhaps a little old, was upon the whole a well-chosen and deserving consort for life. But the letter from Miss Altifiorla was very different from these, and as it had some effect perhaps in producing the circumstances which are to be told, it shall be given at length;—

'My dear Cecilia,—I am of course expected to congratulate you, and as far as

Mr. Western's merits are concerned, I do so with my full heart. He is possessed, I have no doubt, of all those virtues which should adorn a husband, and is in all respects the very opposite to Sir Francis Geraldine. You give me to understand that he is steady, hard-working, and properly ambitious. In spite of the mistake which you made in reference to Sir Francis Geraldine, I will not doubt but that your judgment in respect to Mr. Western will be found correct. If it is to be I dare say it could not be better. But must it be?' 'Of course it must,' said Cecilia to herself, feeling very angry with Miss Altifiorla for raising the question at such a time and in such a manner. 'After all the sweet converse and sweeter resolutions that have passed between us on this matter, must all be abandoned like a breath of summer wind, meaning nothing?' Of what infinitely

bad taste was not the woman guilty, in thus raising the question when the only final answer to it had been already given? Cecilia felt ashamed of herself as she thought of this, in that she had admitted the friendship of such a friend. 'A breath of summer wind!' she said, repeating with scorn her friend's somewhat high-flown words. 'I cannot but say that, like Martha, you have chosen the worser part,' continued the letter. 'The things of the world, which are in themselves but accidents, have been for a moment all in all to you; but knowing you as I do, I am aware how soon they will fade away, and have no more than their proper weight. Then you will wake some day, and feel that you have devoted yourself to the mending of his stockings and the feeding of his babies.' There was something in this which stirred Cecilia to absolute wrath. If there were

babies would they not be her babies as well as his? Was it not the intention of the Lord that the world should be populated? The worser part, indeed! Then she took up the cudgels in her own mind on behalf of Martha, as she had often done before. How would the world get on unless there were Marthas? And was it not more than probable that a self-dubbed Mary should fall into idle ways under the pretence that she was filled with special inspiration? Looking at Miss Altifiorla as a Mary, she was somewhat in love with the Marthas.

'I do not doubt that Mr. Western is what he should be,' the letter went on, 'but even judging him by your letter, I find that he is autocratic and self-opinioned. It is his future life and not yours of which he is thinking, his success and not yours, his doings and not your doings.' 'How does she know?' exclaimed

Cecilia. 'She has only my account of him, and not his of me.' 'And he is right in this,' went on the letter, 'because the ways of the world allow such privileges to men. What would a man be unless he took the place which his personal strength has obtained for him? For women, in the general, of course matrimony is fit. They have to earn their bread, and think of little else. To be a man's toy and then his slave, with due allowance for food and clothes, suffices for them. But I had dreamed a dream that it would not suffice for you. Alas, alas! I stand alone now in the expression of my creed. You must excuse me if I repine, when I find myself so cruelly deserted.'

All this Cecilia felt to be as absurd as it was ill-timed;—and to be redeemed, as it were, from its ill-nature by its ridiculous philosophy. But at last there came a para-

graph which admitted of no such excuse. 'What has Mr. Western said as to the story of Sir Francis Geraldine? Of course you have told him the whole, and I presume that he has pardoned that episode. In spite of the expression of feelings which I have been unable to control, you must believe, dear Cecilia, that I am as anxious as ever for your happiness, and am,

'Your most affectionate friend,

'FRANCESCA ALTIFIORLA.'

Cecilia, when she had completed the reading of the letter, believed nothing of the kind. That last paragraph about Sir Francis had turned all her kindly feelings into wrath, and contained one word which she knew not how to endure. She was told that Mr. Western had 'pardoned' the Geraldine episode in her life. She had done nothing for which pardon had been necessary. To

merit pardon there must have been misconduct; and as this woman had known all her behaviour in that matter, what right had she to talk of pardon? In what had she deserved pardon;—or at any rate the pardon of Mr. Western? There had been a foolish engagement made between her and Sir Francis Geraldine, which had been most wisely dissolved. The sin, if sin there had been, was against Sir Francis, and certainly had never been considered as sin by this woman who now wrote to her. Was it a sin that she had loved before, a matter as to which Mr. Western was necessarily in ignorance when he first came to her? But might it not come to pass that his pardon should be required in that the story had never been told to him? It was the sting which came from that feeling which added fierceness to her wrath. 'Of course you have told him the whole, and I presume

that he has pardoned that episode!' She had not told Mr. Western the whole, and had thus created another episode for which his pardon might be required. It was this that the woman had intended to insinuate, understanding with her little sharpness, with her poor appreciation of character, how probable it was that Cecilia should not have told him of her previous engagement.

She sat thinking of it all that night till the matter assumed new difficulties in her mind's eyesight. And she began to question to herself whether Mr. Western had a right to her secret,—whether the secret did not belong to two persons, and she was bound to keep it for the sake of the other person. She had committed a wrong, an injury, or at any rate had inflicted a deserved punishment upon Sir Francis; one as to which a man would naturally much dislike that it should be noised

about the world. Was she not bound to keep her secret still a secret for his sake? She was angry with herself when she asked the question, but still she asked it. She knew that she owed nothing to Sir Francis Geraldine, and that she owed all to Mr. Western. But still she asked it, because in that way could she best strengthen herself against the telling of the story. The more she turned the matter in her mind, the more impossible to her became the task of telling it. At last she resolved that she would not tell it now. She would not tell it at any rate till she again saw him,—because Miss Altifiorla had told her that she 'presumed he had pardoned her that episode.'

It was arranged that they should be married at Exeter in April. Their house there was not yet vacant, but would be lent to them for a fortnight. After the marriage

Mrs. Holt would go into lodgings, and remain there till the house should be ready for her. But they were both to return to Exeter together, and then there would be bustle and confusion till the happy ceremony should have been performed. It was arranged that she should have but two bridesmaids, but she was determined that she would not ask Miss Altifiorla to be one of them. A younger sister of Mrs. Green and a younger sister also of Maude Hippesley were chosen. Miss Altifiorla, when she came to see Cecilia on her return, expressed herself as quite satisfied. 'It is best so, dear,' she said. 'I was afraid that you would ask me. Of course I should have done it, but my heart would not have been there. You can understand it all, I know.' Cecilia's wrath had become mitigated by this time, and she answered her friend civilly. 'Just so. You think I ought to be

an old maid, and therefore do not like to lend a hand at turning me into a young wife. I have got two girls who have no objection on that score.' 'You might find a hundred in Exeter,' said Miss Altifiorla proudly, 'and yet I may be right in my opinions.'

Mr. Western was to come down to Exeter only on the day before the marriage. The Holts had seen him as they came through London where they slept one night, but as yet the story had not been told. Cecilia expected, almost wished, that the story might reach him from other quarters. It was so natural now that he should talk about the girl whom he intended to marry, and so natural,—as Cecilia thought,—that in doing so he should hear the name of Sir Francis Geraldine. Sir Francis was a man well known to the world of fashion, and many men must have heard of his intended marriage. Cecilia,

though she almost hoped, almost feared that it should be so. The figure of Mr. Western asking with an angry voice why he had not been told did alarm her. But he asked no such question, nor, as far as Cecilia knew, had he heard anything of Sir Francis when the Holts passed through London.

Nor did he seem to have heard it when he came down to Exeter. At any rate he did not say a word respecting Sir Francis. He spent the last evening with the Holts in their own house, and Cecilia felt that he had never before made himself so happy with her, so pleasant, and so joyous. It had been the same during their long walk together in the afternoon. He was so full of affairs which were his own, which were so soon to become her own, that there was not a moment for her in which she could tell the story. There are stories for the telling of which a peculiar

atmosphere is required, and this was one of them. She could not interrupt him in the middle of his discourse and say:—'Oh, by-the-bye,—there is something that I have got to say to you.' To tell the story she must tune her mind to the purpose. She must begin it in a proper tone, and be sure that he would be ready to hearken to it as it should be heard. She felt that the telling would be specially difficult in that it had been put off so long. But though she had made up her mind to tell it before she had started on her walk, the desirable moment never came. So she again put it off, saying that it should be done late at night when her mother had gone to her bed. The time came when he was alone with her, sitting with his arm around her waist, telling her of all the things she should do for him to make his life blessed;—and how he too would endeavour to do some

little things for her in order that her life might be happy. She would not tell it then. Though little might come of it, she could not do it. And yet from day to day the feeling had grown upon her that it was certainly her duty to let him know that one accident in her life. There was no disgrace in it, no cause for anger on his part, nor even for displeasure if it had only been told him at Rome. He could then have taken her, or left her as he pleased. Of course he would have taken her, and the only trouble of her life would have been spared her. What possible reason could there have been that he should not take her? It was not any reason of that kind which had kept her silent. Of that she was quite confident. Indeed now she could not explain to herself why she had held her peace. It seemed to her as though she must have been mad to have let day after day go by

at Rome and never to have mentioned to him the name of Sir Francis Geraldine. But such, alas! had been the fact. And now the time had come in which she found it to be impossible to tell the story. As she went for the last time to her solitary bed she endeavoured to console herself by thinking that he must have heard of it from other quarters. But then again she declared that he in his nobility would certainly not have been silent. He would have questioned her and then have told her that all was right between them. But now as she tossed unhappily on her pillow she told herself that all was wrong.

CHAPTER VI.

WHAT ALL HER FRIENDS SAID ABOUT IT.

And 'all went merry as a marriage bell.' George Western and Cecilia Holt were married in the cathedral by the Dean, who was thus supposed to show his great anger at his brother-in-law's conduct. And this was more strongly evinced by the presence of all the Hippesleys;—for all were there to grace the ceremony except Maude, who was still absent with her young squire, and who wrote a letter full of the warmest affection and congratulations, which Cecilia received on that very morning. Miss Altifiorla also came to the cathedral, with pink bows in her bonnet,

determined to show that though she were left alone in her theory of life she did not resent the desertion. And Mrs. Green was there, humble and sweet-tempered as ever, snubbing her husband a little who assisted at the altar, and whispering a word into her friend's ears to assure her that she had done the proper thing.

It is hardly necessary to say that on the morning of her wedding it was in truth impossible for Cecilia to tell the story. It had now to be left untold, with what hope there might be for smoothing it over in some future stage of her married life. She had done the deed now, and had married the man with the untold secret in her heart. The sin surely could not be of a nature to weigh so deeply on her conscience! She endeavoured to comfort herself with that idea again and again. How many girls are married who

have been engaged to, or at least in love with, half-a-dozen suitors before the man has come who is at last to be their lord! But Cecilia told herself, as she endeavoured thus to find comfort, that her nature was not such as theirs. This thing which she had done was a sin or not a sin, according as it might be regarded by the person who did it. It was a sin to her, a heavy, grievous sin, and one that weighed terribly on her conscience as she repeated the words after the Dean at the altar that morning. There was a moment in which she almost refused to repeat them, —in which she almost brought herself to demand that she might retire for a time with him who was not yet her husband, and give him another chance. Her mind entertained an exaggerated feeling of it, a feeling which she felt to be exaggerated but which she could not restrain. In the meantime the

service went on; the irrevocable word was spoken; and when it was done she was led away into the cathedral vestry as sad a bride as might be.

And yet nobody had seen her trouble. With a capacity for struggling, infinitely greater than that possessed by any man, she had smiled and looked happy beneath her bridal finery, as though no grief had weighed heavily at her heart. And he was as jocund a bridegroom as ever put a ring upon a lady's finger. All that gloom of his, which had seemed to be his nature till after she had accepted him, had vanished altogether. And he carried himself with no sheepish, shame-faced demeanour as though half ashamed of the thing which he had done. He seemed as proud to be a bridegroom as ever girl was to become a bride. And in truth he was proud of her and did think that he had

chosen well. After the former troubles of his life he did feel that he had brought himself to a happy haven at last.

There was a modest breakfast at Mrs. Holt's house, from which the guests departed quickly as soon as the bride and bridegroom had been taken away to the railway station. But when the others were gone Miss Altifiorla remained, —out of kindness. Mrs. Holt need make no stranger of her, and it would be so desolate for her to be alone. So surmised Miss Altifiorla. 'I suppose,' said she, when she had fastened up the pink ribbons so that they might not be soiled by the trifle with which she prepared to regale herself while she asked the question, 'I suppose that he knows all the story about that other man?'

'Why should he?' asked Mrs. Holt in a sharp tone that was quite uncommon to her.

'Well; I do not know much about such

things, but I presume it is common to tell a gentleman when anything of that kind has occurred.'

'What business has he to know? And what can it matter? Perhaps he does know it.'

'But Cecilia has not told him?'

'Why should she tell him? I don't think that it is a thing we need talk about. You may be quite sure that Cecilia has done what is proper.' In saying this Mrs. Holt belied her own thoughts. Cecilia had never said a word to her about it, nor had she dared to say a word to her own daughter on the subject. She had been intently anxious that her daughter should be married, and when she had seen Mr. Western in the act of falling in love, had studiously abstained from all subjects which might bring about a reference to Sir Francis Geraldine. But she had felt that her daughter would make that all straight. Her daughter was so much

more wise, so much more certain to do what was right, so much more high-minded than was she, that she considered herself bound to leave all that to Cecilia. But as the days went on and the hour fixed for the marriage became nearer and nearer she had become anxious. Something seemed to tell her that a duty had been omitted. But the moment had never come in which she had been able to ask her daughter. And now she would not endure to be cross-examined on the subject by Miss Altifiorla.

But Miss Altifiorla was not at all afraid of Mrs. Holt, and was determined to push the question a little further. 'He ought to know, you know. I am sure Cecilia will have thought that.'

'If he ought to know then he does know,' said Mrs. Holt with great certainty. 'I am sure we may leave all that to Cecilia herself.

If he is satisfied with her, it does not matter much who else may be dissatisfied.'

'Oh, if he is satisfied, that is enough,' said Miss Altifiorla as she took her leave. But she felt sure that the secret had not been told, and that it ought to have been told, and she felt proud to think that she had spotted the fault. Cecilia Holt would have done very well in the world had she confined herself,—as she had solemnly promised,—to those high but solitary feminine duties to which Miss Altifiorla had devoted herself. But she had chosen to make herself the slave of a man who,—as Miss Altifiorla expressed it to herself,—'would turn upon her and rend her.' And she, Miss Altifiorla, had seen and did see it all. The time might come when the wounded dove would return to her care. Of course she hoped that the time would not come;—but it might.

'I'll tell you one thing,' said Mrs. Green to

her husband as they walked home from the breakfast. 'That girl has not yet said a word to that man about Sir Francis Geraldine.'

'What makes you think that, my dear?'

'Think it! I know it. It was not likely that there should be much talk about Sir Francis either in the cathedral or at the breakfast; but one can tell from other things whether a subject has been avoided. These are plain when little things would have been said but are not said. There has been no allusion made to their reason for leaving the house.'

'I don't see that it signifies much, my dear.'

'Oh; doesn't it? What would you have thought if after I had become engaged to you you had found that a month or two before I had been engaged to another man?'

'It is more than twelve months, my dear.'

'No, it is not more than twelve months since first they met in Italy. I know what I

am talking about, and you need not contradict me. You'll find that he'll learn it of a sudden, and then all the fat will be in the fire. I know what men are.' It was thus that the gentle Mrs. Green expressed herself on the subject to her husband.

At the Deanery the matter was spoken of in a different tone but still with similar feelings. 'I don't think Cecilia has ever yet said a word to that poor man as to her engagement with Francis. I cannot tell what has put it into my mind, but I think that it is so.' It was thus that Mrs. Hippesley spoke to the Dean.

'Your brother behaved very badly;—very badly,' said the Dean.

'That has got nothing to do with it. Mr. Western won't care a straw whether Francis behaved well or ill. And for the matter of that I don't think that as yet we quite know the truth of it. Nor would he

care if his wife had behaved ill to the other man, so long as she behaved well to him. But if he has heard nothing of it and now finds it out, he's not the man I take him to be if he don't let her hear of it.'

'It's nothing to us,' said the Dean.

'Oh, no; it's nothing to us. But you'll see that what I say comes true.'

In this way all the world of Cecilia's friends were talking on the matter which she had mentioned to no one. She still hoped that her husband might have heard the story, and that he kept it buried in his bosom. But it never occurred to her that it would become matter of discussion among her friends at Exeter.

There was one other person who also discussed it very much at his ease. Sir Francis Geraldine among his friends in London had been congratulated on his safe but miraculous

escape. With a certain number of men he had been wont to discuss the chances of matrimony. Should he die, without having an heir, his title and property would go to his cousin, Captain Geraldine, who was a man some fifteen years younger than himself and already in possession of a large fortune. There were many people in the world whom Sir Francis hated, but none whom he hated so cordially as his cousin. Three or four years since he had been ill, nearly to dying, and had declared that he never would have recovered but for the necessity that he was under to keep his cousin out of the baronetage. It had therefore become imperative on him to marry in order that there might be an heir to the property. And though he had for a few weeks been perfectly contented with his Cecilia, there could be no doubt that he had experienced keenly the sense of relief

when she had told him that the engagement must be at an end. Another marriage must be arranged, but there would be time for that; and he would take care, that on this occasion he would not put himself into the hands of one who was *exigeante* and had a will of her own. 'By Gad,' he said to his particular friend, Dick Ross, 'I would almost sooner that my cousin Walter had the property than put it and myself into the hands of such a virago.'

'You'll only get another,' said Dick, 'that will not let on, but will turn out to be twice as bad in the washing.'

'That I hardly think probable. There are many things which go to the choice of a wife, and the worst of it is that they are not compatible one with another. A woman should be handsome; but then she is proud. A woman should have a certain air of dig-

nity; but when she has got it she knows that herself, and shows it off in the wrong place. She should be young; but if she is too young she is silly: wait a little and she becomes strong-minded and headstrong. If she don't read anything she becomes an ass and a bore; but if she do she despises a man because he is not always doing the same thing. If she is a nobody the world thinks nothing of her. If she come of high birth she thinks a deal too much of herself. It is difficult.'

'I'd have nothing to do with any of them,' said Dick Ross.

'And let that puppy come in! He wrote to me to congratulate me on my marriage, just when he knew it was off.'

'I'll tell you what I'd do,' said Dick. 'I'd marry some milk-maid and keep her down on the property. I'd see that it was

all done legally, and I'd take the kid away when he was three or four years old.'

'Everybody would talk about it.'

'Let 'em talk,' said Dick heroically. 'They couldn't talk you out of your ease or your pleasure or your money. I never could find out the harm of people talking about you. They might say whatever they pleased of me for five hundred a year.'

Then there came the news that Cecilia Holt was going to marry Mr. Western. The tidings reached Sir Francis while the lovers were still at Rome. Of Mr. Western Sir Francis knew something. In the first place his cousin Walter Geraldine had taken away the girl to whom Mr. Western had in the first instance been engaged. And then they were in some degree neighbours, each possessing a small property in Berkshire. Sir Francis had bought his now some years since for

racing purposes. It was adjacent to Ascot, and had been let or used by himself during the racing week, as he had or had not been short of money. Mr. Western's small property had come to him from his uncle. But he had held it always in his own hands, and intended now to take his bride there as soon as their short honeymoon trip should be over. In this way Sir Francis had come to know something of Cecilia's husband, and did not especially love him. 'That young lady of mine has picked up old Western on her travels.' This Sir Francis said to his friend Ross up in London. The reader however must remember that 'old Western' was in fact a younger man than Sir Francis himself.

'I suppose he's welcome to her?' said Ross.

'I'm not so sure of that. Of course he is welcome in one way. She'll make him

miserable and he'll do as much for her. You may let them alone for that.'

'Why should you care about it?'

'Well; I don't know. A fellow has a sort of feeling about a girl when he has been spooning on her himself. He doesn't want to think that another fellow is to pick her up immediately.'

'Dog in the manger, you mean.'

'You may call it that if you like. You never cared for any young woman, I suppose?'

'Oh, haven't I! Lots of 'em. But if I couldn't get a girl myself I never cared who had her. What's the good of being selfish?'

'What's the good of lying?' said Sir Francis, propounding a great doctrine in sociology. 'If I feel cut up what's the use of saying I don't,—unless I want to deceive the man I'm talking to? If I feel that I'd

like a girl to be punished for her impertinence, what's the use of my pretending to myself that I don't want it? If I wish a person to be injured, what's the use of saying I wish them all the good in the world,—unless there's something to be gained by my saying it? Now I don't care to tell you lies. I am quite willing that you should know all the truth about me. Therefore I tell you that I'm not best pleased that this minx should have already picked up another man.'

'He has the devil of a temper,' said Dick Ross, wishing to make the matter as pleasant as possible to his friend.

'So your Miss Holt is married,' Ross said to his friend on the day after the ceremony.

'Yes; she is married, and her troubles have now to begin. I wonder whether she has told him the little episode of our loves.'

'You may be sure of that,' said Dick.

'I am not at all so sure of it. She may have told him when they first became acquainted, but I cannot imagine her telling him afterwards. He is as proud as she, and is just the man not to like it.'

'It doesn't much signify to you at any rate,' said the indifferent Dick.

'I'm not so sure of that,' said Sir Francis. 'I like the truth to be told. It may become my duty to take care that poor Mr. Western shall know all about it.'

'What a beast that fellow is for mischief!' said Dick Ross as he walked home from his club that evening.

CHAPTER VII.

MISS ALTIFIORLA'S ARRIVAL.

YES;—Sir Francis Geraldine was a beast for mischief! Thinking the matter over, he resolved that Mr. Western should not be left in the dark as to his wife's episode. And he determined that Mr. Western would think more of the matter if it were represented to him that his wife had been jilted, and had been jilted unmistakably before they two had met each other on the Continent. He was right in this. According to the usages of the world the lady would have less to say for herself if that were the case and would have more difficulty in saying it. Therefore the

husband would be the more bound to hear it. Sir Francis was a beast for mischief, but he knew what he was about.

But so did not Mrs. Western when she allowed those opportunities to pass by her which came to her for telling her story before her marriage. In very truth she had had no reason for concealing it but that his story had been so nearly the same. On this account she had put it off, and put it off,—and then the fitting time had passed by. When she was with him alone after their marriage she could not do it,—without confessing her fault in that she had not done it before. She could not bring herself to do so. Standing so high in his esteem as she did, and conscious that he was thoroughly happy in his appreciation of her feminine merit, she could not make him miserable by descending from her pedestal to the telling of

a story, which was disgraceful in that it had not been told before.

And there was a peculiarity of manner in him of which she became day by day more conscious. He could be very generous for good conduct to those dependent on him, but seemed to be one who could with difficulty forgive an injury. He wished to have everything about him perfect, and then life should go as soft as a summer's day. He was almost idolatrous to her in these first days of their marriage, but then he had found nothing out. Cecilia knowing his character asked herself after all what there was to be found out. How often that question must occur to the girl just married. But there was nothing. He was pleased with her person; pleased with her wit; pleased that money should have been offered to him, and pleased that for the present he should have declined

it. He liked her dress and her willingness to change any portion of it at his slightest hint. He liked her activity and power of walking, and her general adaptability to himself. He was pleased with everything. But she had the secret at her heart.

'I wonder that you should have lived so long, and never have been in love before,' he said to her one day as they were coming home.

'How do you know?' She blushed as she answered him, but it was a matter as to which any girl might blush.

'I am sure you were not. I should have heard it.' And yet she was silent. She felt at the moment that the time had come,—the only possible time. But she let the moment pass by. Though she was ever thinking of her secret, and ever wishing that she could tell it, longing that it had been told, she

could not bear that it should be surprised from her in this way. 'I think it nicer as it is,' he added as he left the room.

Then she got up and stood alone on the floor, thinking of it all. There she stood for ten minutes thinking of it. She would follow him and, not throwing herself on her knees—but standing boldly before him, tell him all. There was no disgrace in it,—to have loved that other man. Of her own conduct she was confident before all the world. There had been so little secrecy about it that she almost had a right to suppose that it had been known to all men. The more she tried to bring herself to follow him and tell him, the more she assured herself that there should be no necessity. How ought she to have told him, and when? At every point of his story should she have made known to him the same point in hers? 'It was exactly

the same with me.' 'I wouldn't have my young man because he was indifferent.' 'With yours there was another lover ready. That has yet to come with me.' 'You have come abroad for consolation. So have I.' It would have been impossible;—was impossible. 'I think it nicer as it is,' he had said, and she could not do it.

There was some security while they were travelling, and she wished that they might travel for ever. She was happy while with him alone; and so too was he. But for her secret she was completely happy. Let him only be kept in the dark and he would be happy always. She idolised him as her own. She loved him the better for thinking that 'it was nicer as it is;'—or would have done, had it been so. Why should they go where some sudden tidings might mar his joy;—where some sudden tidings certainly

would do so sooner or later? Still they went on and on till in May they reached his house in Berkshire,—he with infinite joy at his heart, and she with the load upon hers.

Early in May they reached Durton Lodge, in Berkshire, and there they stayed during the summer. Mr. Western had his house in London, and there was a question whether they would not go there for the season. But Cecilia had begged to be taken to her house in the country, and there she remained. Durton Lodge was little more than a cottage, but it was very pretty and prettily situated. When the Ascot week came he offered to take her there, but offered it with a smile which she understood to mean that his proposal should not be accepted. Indeed she had no wish for Ascot or for any place in which he or she must meet their old friends. Might it not be possible if they both could

be happy at Durton that there they might remain with some minimum of intercourse with the world? Six months had now passed by since they had become engaged and no good-natured friend had as yet told him the truth. Might it not be possible that the same silence should be as yet preserved? If years could be made to run on then he would have become used to her, and the telling of the secret would not be so severe.

But there came to her a great trouble in regard to her letters from Exeter. Miss Altifiorla would fill hers with long statements about Sir Francis which had no interest whatsoever, but which required to be at once destroyed. She soon learnt in her married life that her husband had no wish to see her letters. She would so willingly have shown them to him, would have taken such a joy in

asking for his sympathy, such a delight in exposing Miss Altifiorla's peculiar views of life, that she lost much by her constrained reticence. But this necessity of destroying papers was very grievous to her. Though she knew that he would not read the letters without her permission, still she must destroy them. In every possible way she endeavoured to silence her correspondent, not answering her at first; and then giving her such answers as were certainly not affectionate. But in no way would Miss Altifiorla be 'snubbed.' Then after a while she proposed to come and stay a week at Durton Lodge. This was not to be endured. The very thought of it filled poor Mrs. Western's heart with despair. And yet she did not like to refuse without telling her husband. Of Miss Altifiorla she had already made mention, and Mr. Western had been taught to laugh at the peculiarities

of the old maid. 'Pray do not have her,' she said to him. 'She will make you very uncomfortable, and my life will be a burden to me.'

'But what can you say to her?'

'No room,' suggested Cecilia.

'But there are two rooms.'

'I know there are. But is one to be driven by a strict regard for literal truth to entertain an unwelcome friend? Miss Altifiorla thought that I ought not to have married you, and as I thought I ought we had some words about it.'

'Whom did she want you to marry?' asked Mr. Western with a laugh.

'Nobody. She is averse to marriage altogether.'

'Unless she was the advocate of some other suitor, I do not see that I need quarrel with her. But she is your friend and not

mine, and if you choose to put her off of course you can do so. I would advise you to find something more probable than the want of a bedroom in a house in which one is only occupied.'

There was truth in this. What reason could she find? Knowing her husband's regard to truth she did not dare to suggest any reason to her friend more plausible than the want of a room, but still essentially false. She was driven about thinking that she would get her husband to take her away from home for awhile—for two or three days. The letter remained unanswered, when her husband suggested to her that she had better write. 'Could we not go somewhere?' she replied with a look of trouble on her brow.

'Run away from home on account of Miss Altifiorla?' said he. She was beginning to be afraid of him and knew that it was so.

She did not dare to declare to him her thoughts and was afraid at every moment that he should read them.

'Then I must just tell her that we can't have her.'

'That will be best,—if you have made up your mind. As far as I am concerned she is welcome. Any friend of yours would be welcome.'

'Oh, George, she would bore you out of your life!'

'I am not so easily bored. I am sure that any intimate friend of yours would have something to say for herself.'

'Oh, plenty.'

'And as for her having been an advocate for single life, she had not seen me and therefore her reasons could not have been personal. There are a great many young women, thirty years old and upwards, who take up

the idea. They do not wish to subject themselves,—perhaps because they have not been asked by the right person.'

'I don't think there have been any persons here. Not that she is bad looking.'

'Perhaps you think I shall fall in love with her.'

'I'd have her directly. But she is the last person in the world I should think of.'

'I can get on very well with anyone who has an idea. There is at any rate something to strike at. The young lady who agrees with everything and suggests nothing, is to me the most intolerable. At any rate you had better make up your mind at once or you'll have her here before you know where you are.'

It was this which did, indeed, happen. On the day after the last conversation Mrs. Western wrote her letter. In it she expressed

her sorrow that engagements for the present prevented her from having the power to entertain her friend. No doubt the letter was cold and unfriendly. As she read it over to herself she declared that she would have been much hurt to have received such a letter from her friend. But she declared again that under no circumstances could she have offered herself as Miss Altifiorla had done. Nevertheless she felt ashamed of the letter. All of which, however, became quite unnecessary, when, in the course of the afternoon, Miss Altifiorla appeared at Durton Lodge. She arrived with a torrent of reasons. She had come up to London on business which admitted of no excuse. She was sure that her friend's letter must have gone astray,—that letter which for the last three days she had been expecting. To return from London to Exeter without seeing her dear friend would be so unfeeling

and unnatural! She must have come to Durton Lodge or must have returned to Exeter. In fact, she so put it as to make it appear impossible that she should not have come.

'My dear Miss Altifiorla,' said Mr. Western, 'I am sure that Cecilia is delighted to see you. And as for me, you are quite welcome.' But, as a fact, there she was. There was no sending her away again;—no getting her out of the house without a sojourn of some days. Whatever mischief she might do might be done at once. There could be no doubt that she would begin to talk of Sir Francis Geraldine and declare the secret which it was now the one care of Cecilia's mind to keep away from her husband. It mattered not that her presence there showed her to be vulgar, impertinent, and obtrusive. There she was, and must be dealt with as a friend, or as an enemy. Again Cecilia

almost made up her mind as to the better course. Let her go to her husband and tell him all, and tell him also why it was that she told him now. Let her endure his anger, and then there would be an end of it. There was nothing else as to which she had need to dread him.

But again, when she found herself with him, he was happy, and jocund, and jested with her about her friend. She could not get him into the humour in which it was proper that he should be told. She did not tell him, and went down to dinner with the terrible load about her heart. Three or four times during the evening the conversation was on the point of turning to matters in which the name of Sir Francis Geraldine would surely be mentioned. With infinite care, but without showing her care, she contrived to master the subject, and to force her friend and her husband to talk of other things. But the struggle was very great,

and she was aware that it could not be repeated. The reader will remember, perhaps, the stern thoughts which Miss Holt had entertained as to her friend when her friend had thought proper to give her some idea of what her duty ought to be in regard to her present husband. She remembered well that Miss Altifiorla had written to her, asking whether Mr. Western had forgiven 'that episode.' And her mother, too, had in writing dropped some word,—some word intended to be only half intelligible as to the question which Miss Altifiorla had asked after the wedding breakfast. She knew well what had been in the woman's mind, and knew also what had been in her own! She remembered how proudly she had disdained the advice of this woman when it had been given to her. And yet now she must go to her and ask for mercy. She saw no other way out of her immediate trouble. She did not believe but that

her friend would be silent when told to be silent; but yet how painfully disgraceful to her, the bride, would be the telling.

She went up to Miss Altifiorla's room after she had gone for the night, and found her friend getting into bed, happy with the assistance of a strange maid. 'Oh, my dear,' said Miss Altifiorla, 'my hair is not half done yet; are you in a hurry for Mary?'

'I will go to my own room,' said Mrs. Western, 'and when Mary will tell me that you are ready I will come to you. There is something I have to tell you.' She had not been five minutes in her own room before Mary summoned her. The 'something to be told' took immediate hold of Miss Altifiorla's imagination, and induced her to be ready for bed with her hair, we may suppose, 'half done.'

'Francesca,' said Mrs. Western, as soon

as she entered the room, 'I have a favour to ask you.'

'A favour?'

'Yes, a favour.' She had come prepared with her request down to the very words in which it should be uttered. 'I do not wish you, while you remain here, to make any allusion to Sir Francis Geraldine.' Miss Altifiorla almost whistled as she heard the words spoken. 'You understand me, do you not? I do not wish any word to be said which may by chance lead to the mention of Sir Francis Geraldine's name. If you will understand that, you will be able to comply with my wishes.' Her request she made almost in the stern words of an absolute order. There was nothing humble in her demeanour, nothing which seemed to tell of a suppliant. And having given her command she remained quiet, waiting for an answer.

'Then this was the reason why you didn't answer me. You did not want to see me, and therefore remained silent.'

'I did not want to see you. But it was not on that account that I remained silent. I should have written to you. Indeed I have written to you, and the letter would have gone to-day. I wrote to you putting you off. But as you are here I have to tell you my wishes. I am sure that you will do as I would have you.'

'I have to think of my duty,' said Miss Altifiorla.

Then there came a black frown on Mrs. Western's brow. Duty! What duty could she have in such a matter, except to her? She suspected the woman of a desire to make mischief. She felt confident that the woman would do so unless repressed by the extraction from her of a promise to the contrary. She

did believe that the woman would keep her word,—that she would feel herself bound to preserve herself from the accusation of direct falsehood; but from her good feeling, from her kindness, from her affection, from that feminine bond which ought to have made her silent, she expected nothing. 'Your duty, Francesca, in this matter is to me,' said Mrs. Western, assuming a wonderful severity of manner. 'You have known me many years and are bound to me by many ties. I tell you what my wishes are. I cannot quite explain my reasons, but I do not doubt that you will guess them.'

'You have kept the secret?' said Miss Altifiorla with a devilish mixture of malice, fun, and cunning.

'It does not matter what I have done. There are reasons, which made me wish to avoid your immediate coming. At the present moment it would interfere gravely with his

happiness and with mine were he to learn the circumstances of Sir Francis Geraldine's courtship. Of course it is painful to me to have to say this to you. It is so painful that to avoid it I have absolutely written to you telling you not to come. This I have done not to avoid your coming, which would otherwise have been a pleasure to me, but to save myself from this great pain. Now you know it all, and know also what it is that I expect from you.'

Miss Altifiorla listened to this in silence. She was seated in an easy bedroom chair, clothed from head to foot in a pale pink dressing-gown, from which the colour was nearly washed out; and her hair as I have said was 'half done.' But in her trouble to collect her thoughts she became quite unaware of all accessories. Her dear friend Cecilia had put the matter to her so strongly that she did not quite dare to refuse. But yet what a fund of gratification might there

not be in telling such a story under such circumstances to the husband! She sat silent for a while meditating on it, till Mrs. Western roughly forced a reply from her lips. 'I desire to have your promise,' said Mrs. Western.

'Oh, yes, of course.'

'You will carefully avoid all allusion to the subject.'

'Since you wish it, I will do so.'

'That is sufficient. And now good-night.'

'I know that I am doing wrong,' said Miss Altifiorla.

'You would indeed be doing wrong,' said Mrs. Western, 'if you were to take upon yourself to destroy my happiness on such a matter after having been duly warned.'

CHAPTER VIII.

LADY GRANT.

It is literally true that the tongue will itch with a desire to tell a secret. Miss Altifiorla's tongue did itch. But upon the whole she endured her suffering, and kept her promise. She did not say a word in Mr. Western's hearing which led to Sir Francis Geraldine as a topic of conversation. But in reward for this she exacted from Mrs. Western an undertaking to keep her at Durton Lodge for a fortnight. The bargain was not exactly struck in those words, but it was so made that Mrs. Western understood how great was the price she paid, and how valuable the article she received in return. 'A fort-

night!' Mr. Western said, when his wife told him of the promise she had made. 'I thought that three days would have been too much for you.'

'Three hours are too much,—as interrupting our happiness. But as she is here, and as we have been very intimate for many years, and as she herself has named the time, I have not liked to contradict her.'

'So be it. She will interfere much more with you than with me, and I suppose that the coming will not be frequently repeated.'

Two days after this another guest proposed to visit them. But this was only for two nights, and her coming had in fact been expected from a period before the marriage. Lady Grant was Mr. Western's younger sister, and the person of whom in all the world he seemed to think the most. Indeed he had

assured his wife that next to herself she was the nearest and the dearest to him. She was a widow, and went but little into society. According to his account she was clever, agreeable, and beautiful. She lived altogether in Scotland, where her time was devoted to her children, and was now coming up to England chiefly with the purpose of seeing her brother's wife. She was to be at Durton Lodge now only for a couple of nights, and then to return and remain with the understood purpose of taking them with her back to Scotland. Of Lady Grant Cecilia had become much afraid, as thinking it more than probable that her secret might be known. But it had seemed that as yet Lady Grant knew nothing of it. She corresponded frequently with her brother, and, as far as Cecilia could tell, the subject had not yet been mentioned between them. Could it be possible that all this time the secret was

known to her husband and to her husband's sister? If so his silence to her was almost cruel.

Up to the morning of her coming Miss Altifiorla had certainly kept her promise. She had kept her promise though there had been twenty little openings as to which it would have been so easy for her to lead the way to the matter as to which her tongue longed to be speaking. When any mention was made of baronets either married or unmarried, of former lovers, of broken vows, or of second engagements, Miss Altifiorla would look with a meaning glance at her hostess. But of these glances Cecilia would apparently take no heed. She had soon got to know that Miss Altifiorla's promise would be kept unless she were led by some other person into an indirect breach of it. Cecilia's life during the period was one of great agony. But still

she endured it without allowing her husband to perceive that it was so.

Now, on the coming of Lady Grant, what steps should she take? Should she ask her friend to be silent also to this second person or should she presume the promise to be so extended? She could not bring herself to make a second request. The task of doing so was too ponderous. Miss Altifiorla's manner of receiving the request made it such a burden that she could not submit herself to it. The woman looked at her and spoke to her in a manner which she was obliged to endure without seeming to endure aught that was unnatural. She looked back to her own struggles during that evening in the bedroom, and could see the woman as she sat struggling, in her pale pink dressing-gown, to escape from the necessity of promising. She could not have another such scene as that. But

she thought that perhaps with one added word the promise might be made to suffice.

When they were alone together Miss Altifiorla would constantly refer to the Geraldine affair. This was to be expected and to be endured. There would come an end to the fortnight and the woman would be gone. 'Do you think that Lady Grant knows?' she said, in the whisper that had become usual to her on such occasions.

'I am sure she knows nothing about it,' said Cecilia.

'How can you be sure? You do not know her and have never seen her. It will be very odd if she has not heard.'

'At any rate nothing need be said to her in this house. No hint need be made to her either by you or me.'

'I think she must have heard it. I happen to know that she has a great correspondence.

Laws! when you think of who Sir Francis is and of the manner in which he lives, it is almost impossible to conceive that a person should not have heard of it.'

'We need not tell her.'

'You are quite safe with me. I have given you my word, and that ought to be enough. Nobody could have been more studious to avoid the matter;—though, indeed, it has sometimes been difficult. And then there has been my feeling of doubt whether my duty ought not to make me divulge it.' There was something in this which was peculiarly painful to Cecilia. The duty of this woman to her husband, to him whom she loved so truly, to him with whom it was in the very core of her heart to have everything in common! Francesca Altifiorla to speak of her duty to him! But even this had to be borne. 'Indeed, I feel every day that I am staying

here that I am sacrificing duty to friendship.' Oh, into what trouble had she fallen without any sin of her own,—as she told herself;—without, at least, any great sin! When was the moment at which she ought to have told the story? She thought that she could remember the exact moment; when he had come back to her for her answer at the end of that week. And then she had not told him, simply from her dislike to repeat back to him the story which she had heard from himself!

Lady Grant came, and nothing could be sweeter or more gracious than the meeting. Miss Altifiorla was not there, and the two ladies, in the presence of the husband and brother, received each other with that quick intimacy and immediate loving friendship which it is given only to women to entertain. Lady Grant was ten years the senior and a widow, and had

that air of living through the evening of her life instead of still enjoying the morning, which is peculiar to widows who have loved their husbands. She was very lovely, even in her mitigated widow's weeds, with a tall figure, and pale oval face, rather thin, but not meagre or attenuated. And Cecilia thought that she saw in her a determination to love her,—and she on her side at once determined that she would return Lady Grant's affection. But not for that reason was her secret to be known. She looked on Lady Grant as one whom she would so willingly have made her friend in all things, but still as one whom, as to that single matter, she could not but regard as her enemy.

They sat together for a couple of hours before dinner, and then at night there was another sitting from which Miss Altifiorla was again banished. And there were some joking questions asked and answers given as to Miss

Altifiorla's presence. There was a something in the manner and gait of Lady Grant which made Cecilia almost ashamed of her Exeter friend. It was not that Miss Altifiorla was ignorant, or unladylike, or ill-dressed; but that she knew her friend too well. Miss Altifiorla was little and mean, whereas Cecilia was ready to accept her sister-in-law as great and noble. Miss Altifiorla was not therefore spoken of in the highest terms, and the mode of her coming to Durton Lodge without an invitation was subjected to some little ridicule.

But Mrs. Western when she went to her room was comforted at any rate in thinking that Lady Grant did not know her secret. How poor must have been her state of comfort may be judged from the fact that this could add to it. On the following morning they met at breakfast, and all went well. But Lady Grant could not but notice that the young lady from

Devonshire seemed to exercise an authority incommensurate with the tone in which she had been described. The day passed by happily enough, and Cecilia was strong in hope that Lady Grant might take her departure without a reference to her one subject of sorrow.

That night, however, her comfort, such as it was, was brought to an end. As they were sitting together in Lady Grant's bedroom Cecilia's ears were suddenly wounded by the mention of the name of Sir Francis Geraldine. In her immediate agony she could hardly tell how it occurred, but she was rapidly asked a question as to her former engagement. In the asking of it there was nothing rough, nothing unkind, nothing intended to wound, nothing to show a feeling that it should not be so;—but the question had been asked. There was the fact that Lady Grant knew the whole story.

But there was the fact also that her husband

did not know it, or else that other fact which she would have given the world to know to be a fact,—that he knew it, and had willingly held his peace respecting it, even to his sister. If that could be so, then she could be happy; if that could be so,—if she could know that it was so, then could she afford to despise Miss Altifiorla and her tyranny. But though the word had been not yet a moment uttered, she could not at first remember how it had been said. There was simply the knowledge that the name of Sir Francis Geraldine had been used, and that it had been declared that she had been engaged to him. Up to this moment she had been very brave, and very powerful, too, over herself. Up to this she had never betrayed herself. But now her courage gave way, the colour came to her cheeks and forehead and neck, and then passed rapidly away,—and she betrayed herself. 'Does not he know

it?' asked Lady Grant. As she said the words she put out her hand and pressed Cecilia's in her own; and the tone of her voice was loving, and friendly, and sisterly. Though there was reproach in it, it was not half so bitter as that which Cecilia was constantly addressing to herself. The reproach was in her ears and not in Lady Grant's voice. But the words were repeated before Cecilia could answer them. 'Does not he know it?'

All her hope was thus abolished. Almost from the moment of Lady Grant's coming into the house she had taught herself to think that he must know it. It was impossible that the two should be ignorant, and impossible also as she thought that the sister should know it and that he should not. But all that was now at an end. It was necessary that she should answer her sister's question, and yet so difficult to find words in which to do so. She attempted

to speak but the word would not come. Even the one word, 'No,' would not form itself on her lips. She fell upon her knees and, burying her face in Lady Grant's lap, thus told her secret.

'He has never heard of it?' again asked Lady Grant. 'Oh, my dear. That should not have been so;—must not be so.'

'If I could tell you! If I could tell you!'

'Tell me what? I am sure there is nothing for you to tell which you need blush to speak.'

'No, no. Nothing, nothing.'

'Then why should he not know? Why should he not have known? Cecilia, you will tell him to-night before he goes to his rest?'

'No,—no. Not to-night. It is impossible. I must wait till that woman has gone.'

'Miss Altifiorla knows it?'

'Oh, yes!'

'She knows, too, that he does not know it?' This question Cecilia answered only by some sign. 'I fancied that it might be so. I thought that there was something between you which had been kept from him. Why, why have you been,—shall I say so foolish?'

'Yes. Yes. Yes; foolish;—oh, yes! But it has been only that. There is nothing, nothing that is not known to all the world. The marvel is that he should not have known it. It was in all the newspapers. But he never thinks of trifles such as that.'

'But why did you keep it from him?'

'Shall I tell you? You know the story of his own engagement.'

'To Miss Tremenhere? Oh, yes, I know the story.'

'And how badly she behaved to him, receiving the attention of another man, absolutely while she was engaged to him.'

'She was very pretty;—but a flighty, inconstant little girl. I felt that George had had a great escape.'

'But such was the story. Well;—he told it me. He told it before he had thought of me. We were together and had become intimate; and out of the full heart the mouth speaks.'

'I can understand that he should have told it you.'

'He did not think of loving me then. Well;—he told me his story, but I kept mine to myself.'

'That was natural,—then.'

'But, when he came to me with the other story and asked me to love him, was I to give him back his own tale and tell him the same thing of myself? I too have had a lover, and I have—jilted him, if you please to call it so. Was I to tell him that?'

'It would hardly have been true, I think.'

'It would have been true,—true to the letter,' said Cecilia, determined that Sir Francis Geraldine's lie should not prevail at this moment. 'I had done to Sir Francis just what the girl had done to your brother. I was guided by other motives and had, I think, behaved properly. Was I to tell it to him then?'

'Why not?'

'His own story, back again? I could not do it, and then, after that, from time to time the occasions have gone by. Words have been said by him which have made it impossible. Twenty times I have determined to do it, and twenty times the opportunity has been lost. I was obliged to tell this woman not to mention it in his presence.'

'He must know it.'

'I wish he did.'

'He is a man who will not bear to be kept in the dark on such a question.'

'I know it. I have read his character and I know it.'

'You cannot know him as I do,' said Lady Grant. 'Though you are his wife you have not been so long enough to know him; how true he is, how affectionate, how honest; but yet how jealous! Were I to say that he is unforgiving I should belie him. Without many thoughts he could forgive the man who had robbed him of his fortune, or his health. But it is hard for him to forgive that which he considers to be an offence against his self-love.'

'I know it all.'

'The longer he is kept in the dark the deeper will be the wound. Of such a man it is impossible to say what he suspects. He will not think that you have loved him the less or that you are less true to him; but there will

be something that will rankle, and which he will not endeavour to define. He is the noblest man on earth, and the most generous—till he be offended. But then he is the most bitter.'

'You describe his character just as I have read it.'

'If it be so you must be careful that he learn this from yourself, and not from others. If it come from you he will be angry, that it has come so late. But his anger will pass by and he will forgive you. But if he hears it from the world at large, if it be told of you, and not by you, then I can understand, that his wrath should be very great.'

'Why has he not heard it already?' asked Mrs. Western after a pause. 'Why has he not been like all the world who have read it in the newspapers? It was talked of so much, that it was hardly necessary that I should tell it myself.'

'You yourself have said that he does not think of trifles. Paragraphs about the loves and marriages of other people he would never read. You may be sure at any rate of this,—that your engagement with Sir Francis Geraldine he has never read.'

'I have sometimes hoped,' said Mrs. Western, 'that he knew it all.' Lady Grant shook her head. 'I have sometimes thought that he knew it all, and regarded it as a matter on which nothing need be said between us. Should I have been angry with him had he not told me of Miss Tremenhere?'

'Do you measure the one thing by the other,' said Lady Grant; 'a man's desires by a woman's, a man's sense of honour by what a woman is supposed to feel? Though a man keep such secrets deep in his bosom through long years of married life, the woman is not supposed to be injured. She may know, or

may not know, and may hear the tale at any period of her married life, and no harm will follow. But a man expects to see every thought in the breast of the woman to whose love he trusts, as though it were all written there for him in the clear light, but written in letters which no one else shall read.'

'I have nothing that he may not read,' said Mrs. Western.

'But there is something that he has not read, something that he has not been invited to read. Let it not remain so. Tell it to him all even though you may have to support his anger, and for a time to pine in the shadow of his displeasure.'

Mrs. Western as she went away to her own room felt some relief at any rate in the conviction that with Lady Grant her secret would be safe. Strong as was the bond which bound her to her brother, there would be on her tongue

no itching desire to tell the secret simply because it was there to be told. She had not threatened, or spoken of her duty, or boasted of her friendship, but had simply given her advice in the strongest language which it was within her power to use. On the next morning she took her leave, and started on her journey without showing even by a glance that she was possessed of any secret.

'Does she know?' asked Miss Altifiorla as soon as the two were in the drawing-room together, using a kind of whisper which had now become habitual to her.

It may almost be said that Mrs. Western had come to hate her friend. She looked forward to the time of her going as a liberation from misery. Miss Altifiorla's intrusion at Durton Lodge was altogether unpalatable to her. She certainly no longer loved her friend, and knew well that her friend knew that it was

so. But still she could not risk the open enmity of one who knew her secret. And she was bound to answer the question that was asked her. 'Yes, she does know it.'

'And what does she say?'

'It matters not what she says. My request to you is that you should not speak of it.'

'But to yourself!'

'No, not to myself or to any other person here.' Then she was silent; and Miss Altifiorla, pursing up her lips, bethought herself whether the demands made upon her friendship were not too heavy. But there still remained five days of the visit.

CHAPTER IX.

MISS ALTIFIORLA'S DEPARTURE.

THE fortnight was nearly gone, and Miss Altifiorla was to start early on the following morning. Cecilia had resolved that she would tell her story to her husband as soon as they were alone together, and make a clean breast. She would tell him everything down as far as she could, to the little feelings which had prevented her from speaking before, to Miss Altifiorla's abominable interference, and to Lady Grant's kind advice. She would do this as soon as Miss Altifiorla was out of the house. But she could not quite bring herself to determine on the words she would use. She was

resolved, however, that in owning her fault she would endeavour to disarm his wrath by special tenderness. If he were tender;—oh, yes, then she would be tender in return. If he took it kindly then she would worship him. All the agony she endured should be explained to him. Of her own folly, she would speak very severely,—if he treated it lightly. But she would do nothing to seem to deprecate his wrath. As to all this she was resolved. But she had not yet settled on the words with which she would commence her narrative.

The last day wore itself away very tediously. Miss Altifiorla was in her manner more objectionable than ever. Mr. Western had evidently disliked her though he had hardly said so. During the days he had left the two women much together, and had remained in his study or had wandered forth alone. In this way he had increased his wife's feeling of anger against

her visitor, and had made her look forward to her departure with increasing impatience. But an event happened which had at once disturbed all her plans. She was sitting in the drawing-room with Miss Altifiorla at about five in the evening, discussing in a most disagreeable manner the secrecy of her first engagement. That is to say, Miss Altifiorla was persisting in the discussion, whereas Mrs. Western was positively refusing to make it a subject of conversation. 'I think you are demanding too much from me,' said Miss Altifiorla. 'I have given way, I am afraid wrongly as to your husband. But I should not do my duty by you were I not to insist on giving you my advice with my last breath. Let me tell it. I shall know how to break the subject to him in a becoming manner.' At this moment the door was opened and the servant announced Sir Francis Geraldine.

The disturbance of the two women was complete. Had the dead ancestor of either of them been ushered in they could not have received him with more trepidation. Miss Altifiorla rose with a look of awe, Mrs. Western with a feeling of anger that was almost dominated by fear. But neither of them for a moment spoke a word, nor gave any sign of making welcome the new guest. 'As I am living so close to you,' said the baronet, putting on that smile which Mrs. Western remembered so well, 'I thought that I was in honour bound to come and renew our acquaintance.'

Mrs. Western was utterly unable to speak. 'I don't think that we knew that you were living in the neighbourhood,' said Miss Altifiorla.

'Oh, yes; I have the prettiest, funniest, smallest little cottage in the world just about two miles off. The Criterion it is called.'

'What a very odd name!' said Miss Altifiorla.

'Yes, it is rather odd. I won the race once and bought the place with the money. The horse was called Scratch'em, and I couldn't call my house Scratch'em. I have built a second cottage, so that it is not so very small, and as it is only two miles off I hope that you and Mrs. Western will come and see it.'

This was addressed exclusively to Cecilia, and made an answer of some kind absolutely necessary. 'I fear that we are going to Scotland very shortly,' she said; 'and my husband is not much in the habit of visiting.'

This was uncivil enough, but Sir Francis did not take it amiss. He sat there for twenty minutes, and even made allusion to their former intimacy at Exeter.

'I am quite well aware how happily all that has ended,' he said;—'at any rate on

your side of the question. You have done very well and very wisely. And I,'—he laughed as he said this,—'have succeeded in getting over it better than might have been expected. At any rate I hope that there will be no ill-will. I shall do myself the honour of asking you and Mr. Western to come and dine with me at the Criterion. It is the little place that Lord Tomahawk had last year.' Then he departed without another word from Cecilia Western.

'Now he must be told,' whispered Miss Altifiorla the moment the door was closed. 'My dear, if you will think of it all round you will perceive that this can be done by no one so well as by myself. I will go to Mr. Western the moment he comes in, and get through it all in half an hour.'

'You will do nothing of the kind,' said Mrs. Western.

'Let me pray you. Let me implore you. Let me beseech you.'

'You will do nothing of the kind. I will admit of no interference in the matter.'

'Interference! You cannot call it interference.'

'I will not have you to speak to my husband on the subject.'

'But what will you do?'

'Whatever I do shall be done by myself alone.'

'But you must tell him instantly. You cannot allow this man to come and call and yet say nothing about it. And he would not have called without some previous acquaintance. This you will have to describe, and if you say that you merely knew him at Exeter, there will be in that case an additional fib.' The use of such words applied to herself by this woman was intolerable. But she could

only answer them by an involuntary frown upon her brow. 'And then,' continued Miss Altifiorla, 'of course he will refer to me. He will conclude that as you knew Sir Francis at Exeter I must have known him. I cannot tell a fib.'

She could not tell a fib! And that was uttered in such a way as to declare that Mrs. Western had been fibbing. I cannot tell a fib! 'You will leave me at any rate to mind my own business,' said Cecilia in an indignant tone as she left the room.

But Mr. Western was at the hall door, and the coming of Sir Francis had to be explained at once. That could not be left to be told when Miss Altifiorla should have gone,—not even though she were going to-morrow. 'Sir Francis Geraldine has been here,' she said almost before he had entered the room. She was immediately aware that she had been too

sudden, and had given by her voice too great an importance to her idea of the visit.

But he was not surprised at that and did not notice it. 'Sir Francis Geraldine! A man whom I particularly do not wish to know! And what has brought him here?'

'He came to call. He is a Devonshire man, and he knew us at Exeter.'

'He is the Dean's brother-in-law. I remember. And when he came what did he say? Unless you and he were very intimate I think he might as well have remained away. There are some stories here not altogether to his credit. I do not know much about his business, but he is not a delectable acquaintance.'

'We were intimate,' said Cecilia. 'Maude Hippesley, his niece, was my dearest friend.' The words were no sooner out of her mouth than she was aware that she had fibbed. Miss

Altifiorla was justified. Why had she not stopped at the assurance of her intimacy with Sir Francis, and leave unexplained the nature of it? Every step which she took made further steps terribly difficult!

After dinner, Mr. Western, as a matter of course, brought up the subject of Sir Francis Geraldine. 'Did you know him, Miss Altifiorla?'

'Oh, yes!' said that lady, looking at Cecilia with peculiar eyes. Only that Mr. Western was a man and not a woman, and among men the least suspicious till his suspicion was aroused, he would have discovered at once from Miss Altifiorla's manner that there was a secret.

'He seems to have lived in very good clerical society down in Exeter,—a very different class from those with whom he has been intimate here.'

'Of course he was staying at the Deanery,' said Cecilia.

'And the Dean, I know, is a very pearl of Church propriety. It is odd what different colours men show at different places. Down here, where he is well known, a great many even of the racing men fight shy of him. But I beg your pardon if he be a particular friend of yours, Miss Altifiorla.'

'Oh dear, no, not of mine at all. I should never have known him to speak to but for Cecilia.' Her words no doubt were true; but again she looked as though endeavouring to tell all she could without breaking her promise.

'He is one of our Devonshire baronets,' said Cecilia, 'and of course we like to stand by our own. At any rate he is going to ask us to dinner.'

'We cannot dine with him.'

'That's as you please. I don't want to dine with him.'

'I look upon it as very impertinent. He knows that I should not dine with him. There has never been any actual quarrel, but there has been no acquaintance.'

'The acquaintance has been on my part,' said Cecilia, who felt that at every word she uttered she made the case worse for herself hereafter.

'When a woman marries, she has to put up with her husband's friends,' said Mr. Western gravely.

'He is nothing on earth to me. I never wish to see him again as long as I live.'

'It is unfortunate that he should have turned out to be so near a neighbour,' said Miss Altifiorla. Then for the moment Sir Francis Geraldine was allowed to be forgotten.

'I did not like to say it before her,' he said

afterwards in their own room;—and now Cecilia was able to observe that his manner was altogether altered,—'but to tell the truth that man behaved very badly to me myself. I know nothing about racing, but my cousin, poor Jack Western, did. When he died, there was some money due to him by Sir Francis, and I, as his executor, applied for it. Sir Francis answered that debts won by dead men were not payable. But Jack had been alive when he won this, and it should have been paid before. I know nothing about debts of honour as they are called, but I found out that the money should have been paid.'

'What was the end of it?' asked Cecilia.

'I said no more about it. The money would have come into my pocket and I could afford to lose it. But Sir Francis must know what I think of the transaction, and, knowing it, ought not to talk of asking me to dinner.'

'But that was swindling.'

'For the matter of that it's all swindling as far as I can see. One strives to get the money out of another man's pocket by some juggling arrangement. For myself I cannot understand how a gentleman can condescend to wish to gain another man's money. But I leave that all alone. It is so; and when I meet a man who is on the turf as they call it, I keep my own feelings to myself. He has his own laws of conduct and I have mine. But here is a man who does not obey his own laws; and puts money in his pocket by breaking them. He can do as he pleases. It is nothing to me. But he ought not to come and call upon my wife.' In this way he talked himself into a passion; but the passion was now against Sir Francis Geraldine and not against his wife.

On the next morning Miss Altifiorla was despatched by an early train so that she might

be able to get down to Exeter, *viâ* London, early in the day. It behoved her to go to London on the route. She had things to buy and people to see, and to London she went. 'Good-bye, my dear,' she said, seeming to include the husband as well as the wife in the address. 'I have spent a most pleasant fortnight, and have been most delighted to become acquainted with your husband. You are Cecilia Holt no longer. But it would have been sad indeed not to know him who has made you Cecilia Western.' Then she put out her hand, and getting hold of that of the gentleman squeezed it with the warmest affection. But her farewell address made to Mrs. Western in her own room was quite different in its tone. 'Now I am going, Cecilia,' she said, 'and am leaving you in the midst of terrible dangers.'

'I hope not,' said Cecilia.

'But I am. They would have been over now and passed if you would have allowed me to obey my reason, and to tell him the whole story of your former love.'

'Why you?'

'Because I am your most intimate friend. And I think I should have told it in such a manner as to disarm his wrath.'

'It is out of the question. I will tell him.'

'Do so. Do so. But I doubt your courage. Do so this very morning. And remember that at any rate Francesca Altifiorla has been true to her promise.'

That such a promise should have been needed and should have been boasted of with such violent vulgarity was almost more than Mrs. Western could stand. She came down-stairs and then underwent the additional purgatory of listening to the silver-tongued farewell. That she, she with her high ideas of a woman's

duty and a woman's dignity, should have put herself into such a condition was a marvel to herself. Had some one a year since told her that she should become thus afraid of a fellow-creature and of one that she loved best in all the world, she would have repelled him who had told her with disdain. But so it was. How was she to tell her husband that she had been engaged to one whom he had described to her as a gambler and a swindler?

CHAPTER X.

SIR FRANCIS TRAVELS WITH MISS ALTIFIORLA.

Miss Altifiorla was at the station of course before her time. It is the privilege of unmarried ladies when they travel alone to spend a good deal of time at stations. But as she walked up and down the platform she had an opportunity for settling her thoughts. She was angry with three persons—with Mrs. Western, Mr. Western, and with herself. She was very angry with Cecilia. Had Cecilia trusted to her properly she could have sympathised with her thoroughly in all her troubles. She was not angry with her friend in that her friend was afraid of her husband. Would she

have reposed herself and her fears on her friend's bosom it might have been very well. But it was because her friend had not been afraid of her that she was wrath. Mrs. Western had misbehaved egregiously, and had come to her in her trouble solely because it was necessary. So far she had done naturally. But though she had come, she had not come in any of the spirit of humility. She had been bold as brass to her in the midst of her cowardice towards her husband,—imperious to herself and unbending. She had declined her advice with scorn. And yet one word spoken by herself would have been destructive. Seeing that she had been so treated had she not been wrong to abstain from the word?

Her anger against Mr. Western was less hot in its nature but was still constant. He had not liked her, and though he had been formally civil, his dislike had been apparent.

He was a man proud of himself, who ought to be punished for his pride. It was quite proper that he should learn that his wife had been engaged to the man whom he had so violently despised. It would be no more than a fitting reverse of fortune. Mr. Western was, she thought, no better than other men, and ought to be made so to understand. She had not quite arranged in her mind what she could now do in the matter, but for 'dear Cecilia's' sake she was sure that something must be done.

And she was angry with herself at allowing herself to be turned out of the house before the crisis had come. She felt that she ought to have been present at the crisis, and that by the exercise of her own powers she might have hurried on the crisis. In this respect she was by no means satisfied with herself.

She was walking up and down the platform

of the little country station thinking of all this when on a sudden she saw Sir Francis Geraldine get out of a brougham. It cannot be explained why her heart throbbed when she saw Sir Francis get out of his brougham. It was not that she thought that she could ask his advice on the matters which filled her mind, but there probably did come to her vague ideas of the possibility of some joint action. At any rate she received him when he came upon the platform with her blandest smile, and immediately entered into conversation with him respecting the household of the Westerns. What a stiff man he was, so learned, so proper, and so distant! It was impossible to get on with him. No doubt he was very good and all that. But what was their poor dear Cecilia to do with a man so silent, and one who hated all amusements? Before the train came up she and Sir Francis were quite

on good terms together; and as they were both going to London they got into the same carriage.

'Of course he's a prig,' said Sir Francis, as they seated themselves opposite to one another. 'But then his wife is a prig too, and I do not see why they should not suit each other.'

'You did not use to think her a prig, Sir Francis.'

'No; like other men I made a mistake and was nearly having to pay for it. But I discovered in time,—luckily for both of us.'

'You know,' said Miss Altifiorla, 'that Cecilia Holt was my dearest friend, and I cannot endure to hear her abused.'

'Abused! You do not think I wish to abuse her. I am awfully fond of her still. But I do not see why she and Western should not get on very well together. I suppose

they've no secrets from each other,' he added after a pause. Upon this Miss Altifiorla remained silent. 'They tell each other everything I should think.' Still Miss Altifiorla said nothing. 'I should imagine that she would tell him everything.'

'Upon my word I can't say.'

'I suppose she does. About her former engagement, for instance. He knows the whole story, eh?'

'I declare you put it to me in such a way that one doesn't know how to answer you.'

'Different people have such different opinions about these kind of things. Some people think that because a girl has been engaged to a man she never ought to speak to him again when the engagement is broken. For my part I do not see why they should not be as intimate as any other people. She

looked at me the other day as though she thought that I ought not to put myself into the same room with her again. I suppose she did it in obedience to him.'

What was Miss Altifiorla to say in answer to such a question? She did remember her promise, and her promise was in a way binding upon her. She wished so to keep it as to be able to boast that she had kept it. But still she was most anxious to break it in the spirit. She did understand that she had bound herself not to divulge aught about Mrs. Western's secret, and that were she to do so now to Sir Francis she would be untrue to her friend. But the provocation was strong; and she felt that Sir Francis was a man with whom it would be pleasant to form an alliance.

'You must know,' said Sir Francis.

'I don't see that I need know at all. Of course Cecilia does tell me everything; but I

do not see that for that reason I am bound to tell anyone else.'

'Then you do know.'

'Know what?'

'Has she told him that she was engaged to me? Or does he not know it without her telling him?' By this time they had become very intimate, and were whispering backwards and forwards with each other at their end of the carriage. All this was very pleasant to Miss Altifiorla. She felt that she was becoming the recipient of an amount of confidential friendship which had altogether been refused to her during the last two weeks. Sir Francis was a baronet, and a man of fashion, and a gentleman very well thought of in Devonshire, let Mr. Western say what he might about his conduct. Mr. Western was evidently a stiff stern man who did not like the amusements of other gentlemen.

Miss Altifiorla felt that she liked being the friend of a man of fashion, and she despised Mr. Western. She threw herself back on the seat and closed her eyes and laughed. But he pressed her with the same question in another form. 'Does he know that she was engaged to me?'

'If you will ask me, I do not think that he does.'

'You really mean to say that he had never heard of it before his marriage?'

'What am I to do when you press me in this way? Remember that I do not tell you anything of my own knowledge. It is only what I think.'

'You just now said that she told you everything.'

'But perhaps she doesn't know herself.'

'At any rate there is a mystery about it.'

'I think there is, Sir Francis.' After that it was not very long before Miss Altifiorla was induced to talk with great openness of the whole affair, and before they had reached London she had divulged to Sir Francis the fact that Mrs. Western had as yet told her husband nothing of her previous engagement, and lived at the present moment in awe at the idea of having to do so. 'I had no conception that Cecilia would have been such a coward,' she said, as Sir Francis was putting her into a cab, 'but such is the sad fact. She has never mentioned your name.'

'And was therefore dreadfully frightened when I called.'

'Oh, dreadfully! But I shouldn't wonder if she has not told him all about it now.'

'Already, you think.' He was standing at the door of the cab, detaining it, and thereby

showing in a very pleasant manner the importance of the interview.

'Well;—I cannot say. Perhaps not yet. She had certainly not made the communication when I left this morning, but was only waiting for my departure to do so. So she said at least. But she is terribly afraid of him and perhaps has not plucked up her courage. But I must be off now.'

'When do you leave town?'

'This afternoon. You are delaying me terribly at this moment. Don't, Sir Francis!' This she said in a whisper because he had got hold of her hand through the window, as though to say good-bye to her, and did not at once let it go.

'When do you go? I'll see you off by the other train. When do you go, and from where?'

'Will you though? That will be very

kind. Waterloo;—at 4.30. Remember the 4.30.'

'Sans adieu!' Then she kissed her hand to him and was driven off.

This to her was all very pleasant. It gave an instant rose colour to her life. She had achieved such a character down at Exeter for maidenly reserve, and had lived so sternly, that it was hardly in her memory that a man had squeezed her hand before. She did remember one young clergyman who had sinned in this direction, twelve years since, but he was now a Bishop. When she heard the other day that he had been made a Bishop some misgivings as to her great philosophy touched her mind. Had she done right in repudiating mankind? Would it not have been better now to have been driving about the streets of the episcopal city, or perhaps even those of the metropolis, in an episcopal carriage? But, as

she had then said, she had chosen her line and must now abide by it. But the pressing of her hand by Sir Francis had opened up new ideas to her. And they were the pleasanter because a special arrangement had been made for their meeting once again before they left London. As to one point she was quite determined. Mrs. Western and her secret must be altogether discarded. As for her promise she had not really broken it. He had been clever enough to extract from her all that she knew without, as she thought, any positive statement on her own part. At any rate he did know the truth, and no concealment could any longer be of service to Cecilia. It was evident that the way was open to her now, and that she could tell all that she knew without any breach of confidence.

Sir Francis, when he left her, was quite determined to carry his project through. Cecilia

had thrown him over with most abominable unconcern and self-sufficiency. He had intended to honour her and she had monstrously dishonoured him. He had endeavoured to escape this by taking upon himself falsely the fault of having been the first to break their engagement. But there was a doubt as to this point, and people said that he had been jilted —much to his disgust. He was determined to be revenged,—or, as he said to himself, 'he had made up his mind that the broad truth should be known.' It certainly would be the 'broad truth' if he could make Mr. Western understand the relations on which he, Sir Francis, had but a few months before stood in regard to his wife. 'Honesty,' he said to himself, 'demanded it.'

Miss Altifiorla, he thought, was by no means an unpleasant young woman with whom to have an intrigue. She had good looks of

her own, though they were thin and a little pinched. She was in truth thirty-five years old, but she did not quite look it. She had a certain brightness of eye when she was awakened to enthusiasm, and she knew how to make the best of herself. She could whisper and be—or pretend to be—secret. She had about her, at her command, a great air of special friendship. She had not practised it much with men as yet, but there was no reason why she should not do so with advantage. She felt herself already quite on intimate terms with Sir Francis; and of Sir Francis it may be said, that he was sufficiently charmed with Miss Altifiorla to find it expedient to go and see her off from the Waterloo Station.

He found Dick Ross at his club and lunched with him. 'You're just up from the Criterion,' said Dick.

'Yes; I went down for the sake of renewing an old acquaintance, and I renewed it.'

'You've been persecuting that unfortunate young woman.'

'Why a young woman should be thought unfortunate because she marries such a pink of perfection as Mr. Western, and avoids such a scapegrace as I am, I cannot conceive.'

'She's unfortunate because you mean to bully her. Why can't you leave her alone? She has had her chance of war, and you have had yours, and he has had his. As far as I can see you have had the best of it. She is married to a stiff prig of a fellow, who no doubt will make her miserable. Surely that ought to be enough for you.'

'Not quite,' said Sir Francis. 'There is nothing recommends itself to my mind so much as even-handed justice. He played me a trick once, and I'll play him another. She

too played me a trick, and now I can play her one. My good fortune consists in this, that I can kill the two birds with one stone.'

'You mean to kill them?'

'Certainly I do. Why on earth should I let them off? He did not let me off. Nor did she. They think because I carry things in an easy manner that I take them easily. I suffer as much as they do. But they shall suffer as well as I.'

'The most pernicious doctrine I ever heard in my life,' said Dick Ross as he filled his mouth with cold chicken pie.

'When you say pernicious, have you any idea what you mean?'

'Well, yes; awfully savage, and all that kind of thing. Just utter cruelty, and a bad spirit.'

'Those are your ideas because you don't take the trouble to return evil for evil. But

then you never take the trouble to return good for good. In fact, you have no idea of duty, only you don't like to burden your conscience with doing what seems to be ill-natured. Now, if a man does me good, I return it,—which I deem to be a great duty, and if he does me evil, I generally return that sooner or later. There is some idea of justice in my conduct, but there is none in yours.'

'Do you mean to punish them both?'

'Well, yes; as far as it is in my power, both.'

'Don't,' said Dick Ross, looking up with something like real sorrow depicted on his face. But still he called for some greengage tart.

'I like to get the better of my enemies,' said the Baronet. 'You like fruit pie. I doubt if you'd even give up fruit pie to save this woman.'

'I will,' said Dick, pushing the pie away from him.

'The sacrifice would be all in vain. I must write the letter to-day, and as it has to be thought about I must begin it at once. Whatever happens, do not let your good nature quarrel with your appetite.'

'He's a fiend, a perfect fiend,' said Dick Ross, as he sate dawdling over his cheese. 'I wouldn't have his ill-nature for all his money.' But he turned that sentiment over in his mind, endeavouring to ascertain what he would do if the offer of the exchange were made to him. For Dick was very poor, and at this moment was in great want of money. 'Sir Francis went into the smoking-room, and sitting there alone with a cigar in his mouth, meditated the letter which he would have to write. The letter should be addressed to Mr. Western, and was one which could not be written without much

forethought. He not only must tell his story, but must give some reason more or less plausible for the telling of it. He did not think that he could at once make his idea of justice plain to Mr. Western. He could not put forth his case so clearly as to make the husband understand that all was done in fair honour and honesty. But as he thought of it, he came to the conclusion that he did not much care what impression he might leave on the mind of Mr. Western;—and still less what impression he might leave on hers. He might probably succeed in creating a quarrel, and he was of opinion that Mr. Western was a man who would not quarrel lightly, but, when he did, would quarrel very earnestly. Having thought it all over with great deliberation, he went upstairs, and in twenty minutes had his letter written. At a quarter past four he was at the Waterloo Station to see the departure of Miss

Altifiorla. Even he could perceive that she was somewhat brighter in her attire than when he had met her early in the morning. He could not say what had been done, but something had been added to please his eyes. The gloves were not the same, nor the ribbons; and he thought that he perceived that even the bonnet had been altered. Her manner too was changed. There was a careless ease and freedom about her which he rather liked; and he took it in good part that Miss Altifiorla had prepared herself for the interview, though he were to be with her but for a few minutes, and that she should be different from the Miss Altifiorla as she had come away from the Western breakfast table. 'Now there is one thing I want you to promise me,' she said as she gave him her hand.

'Anything on earth.'

'Don't let Mr. Western or Cecilia know

that you know about that.' He laughed and merely shook his head. 'Pray don't. What's the good? You'll only create a disturbance and misery. Poor dear Cecilia has been uncommonly silly. But I don't think that she deserves to be punished quite so severely.'

'I'm afraid I must differ from you there,' he said, shaking his head.

'Is it absolutely necessary?'

'Absolutely.'

'Poor Cecilia! How can she have been so foolish! He is of such a singular temperament that I do not know what the effect may be. I wish you would think better of it, Sir Francis.'

'And leave myself to stand in my present very uncomfortable position! And that after such treatment as hers. I have thought it all over, and have found myself bound in honour to inform him. And it is for the sake of let-

ting you know that I have come here. Perhaps you may be called upon to say or do something in the matter.'

'I suppose it cannot be helped,' said Miss Altifiorla with a sigh.

'It cannot,' he replied.

'Poor dear Cecilia. She has brought it on her own head. I must get into my train now, as we are just off. I am so much obliged to you for coming to see me start.'

'We shall meet each other before long,' he said, as she again kissed her hand and took her departure. Miss Altifiorla could not but think what a happy chance it was that prevented his marriage with Cecilia Holt.

CHAPTER XI.

MR. WESTERN HEARS THE STORY.

It was the custom for Mr. Western to come down into the library before breakfast, and there to receive his letters. On the morning after Miss Altifiorla's departure he got one by which it may be said that he was indeed astonished. It can seldom be the case that a man shall receive a letter by which he is so absolutely lifted out of his own world of ordinary contentment into another absolutely different. And the world into which he was lifted was one black with unintelligible storms and clouds. It was as though everything were suddenly changed for him. The change was

of a nature which altogether unmanned him. Had he been ruined that would have been as nothing in comparison. The death of no friend, —so he told himself in the first moment of his misery,—could have so afflicted him. He read the letter through twice and thrice, and then sat silent with it in his hand thinking of it. There could be but one relief, but that relief must surely be forthcoming. The letter could not be true. How to account for its falsehood, how to explain to himself that such a letter should have been written to him without any foundation for it, without any basis on which such a story could be constructed, he could not imagine to himself. But he resolved not to believe it. He saw that were he to believe it, and to have believed it wrongly, the offence given would be ineffable. He should never dare to look his wife in the face again. It was at any rate infinitely safer for him to disbelieve

it. He sat there mute, immovable, without a change of countenance, without even a frown on his brow, for a quarter of an hour; and at the end of that time he got up and shook himself. It was not true. Whatever might be the explanation, it could not be true. There was some foul plot against his happiness; but whatever the nature of the plot might be, he was sure that the story as told to him in that letter was not true. And yet it was with a very heavy heart that he rose and walked off to his wife's room.

The letter ran as follows:—

'My dear Mr. Western,—I think it is necessary that I should allude to a former little incident in my past life,—one that took place in the course of the last year only,—to account for the visit which I made to your house the other day, and which was not, I think, very well taken. I have no reason to

doubt but that you are acquainted with all the circumstances. Indeed I look upon it as impossible that you should not be so. But, taking that for granted, I have to explain my own conduct.

'It seems but the other day that Cecilia Holt and I were engaged to be married.' Mr. Western, when he came to this passage, felt for a moment as though he had received a bullet in his heart. 'All Exeter knew of the engagement, and all Exeter seemed to be well pleased. I was staying with my brother-in-law, the Dean, and had found Miss Holt very intimate at the Deanery. It is not for me now to explain the way in which our engagement was broken through, but your wife, I do not doubt, in telling you of the affair, will have stated that she did not consider herself to have been ill-used. I am quite certain that she can never have said so even to yourself. I do not wish

to go into the matter in all its details, but I am confident that she cannot have complained of me.

'Under these circumstances, when I found myself living close to you, and to her also, I thought it better to call and to offer such courtesies as are generally held to be pleasant in a neighbourhood. It would, I thought, be much pleasanter to meet in that frank way than to go on cutting each other, especially as there was no ground for a quarrel on either side. I have, however, learned since that something has been taken amiss. What is it? If it be that I was before you, that is too late to be mended. You, at any rate, have won the prize, and ought to be contented. You also were engaged about the same time, and my cousin has got your young lady. It is I that am left out in the cold, and I really do not see that you have any reason to be angry. I have no wish to

force myself upon you, and if you do not wish to be gracious down at Ascot, then let there be an end of it.

'Yours truly,

'FRANCIS GERALDINE.'

He arose and went slowly up-stairs to his wife's bedroom. It was just the time when she would come down to breakfast, and as his hand was on the lock of the door she opened it to come out. The moment she saw him she knew that her secret had been divulged. She knew that he knew it, and yet he had endeavoured to eradicate all show of anger from his face, as all reality of it from his heart. He was sure,—was sure,—that the story was an infamous falsehood! His wife, his chosen one, his Cecilia to have been engaged, a year ago, to such a one as Sir Francis Geraldine,—to so base, so mean a creature,—and then to have married him without telling a word of it all!

To have kept him wilfully, carefully, in the dark, with studied premeditation so as to be sure of effecting her own marriage before he should learn it, and that too when he had told her everything as to himself! It certainly could not be, and was not true!

She stood still holding the door open when she saw him there with the letter in his hand. There was an instant certainty that the blow had come and must be borne even should it kill her. It was as though she were already crushed by the weight of it. Her own conduct appeared to her black with all its enormity. Though there had been so little done by her which was really amiss, yet she felt that she had been guilty beyond the reach of pardon. Twelve months since she could have declared that she knew herself so well as to be sure that she could never tremble before anyone. But all that was changed with her. Her very

nature was changed. She felt as though she were a guilty, discovered, and disgraced criminal. She stood perfectly still, looking him in the face, but without a word.

And he! His perceptions were not quick as hers, and he still was determined to disbelieve. 'Cecilia!' he said, 'I have got a letter.' And he passed on into the room. She followed him and stood with her hand resting on the shoulder of the sofa. 'I have got a letter from Sir Francis Geraldine.'

'What does Sir Francis Geraldine say of me?' she replied.

Had he been a man possessed of quick wit, he would have perceived now that the letter was true. There was confession in the very tone of her voice. But he had come there determined that it was not true, determined at any rate to act as though it were not true; and it was necessary that he should go through the

game as he had arranged to play it. 'It is a base letter,' he said. 'A foul, lying letter. But there is some plot in it of which I know nothing. You can perhaps explain the plot.'

'Maybe the letter is true,' she said standing there, not submissive before him, but still utterly miserable in her guilt.

'It is untrue. It cannot possibly be true. It contains a damnable lie. He says that twelve months since you were engaged to him as his wife. Why does he lie like that?' She stood before him quite quiet without the change of a muscle of her face. 'Do you understand the meaning of it all?'

'Oh, yes.'

'What is the meaning? Speak to me and explain it.'

'I was engaged to marry Sir Francis Geraldine just before I knew you. It was broken off and then we went upon the Continent.

There I met you. Oh, George, I have loved you so well! I do love you so truly.' As she spoke she endeavoured to take his hand in hers. She made that one effort to be tender in obedience to her conscience, but as she made it she knew that it would be in vain.

He rejected her hand, without violence indeed but still with an assured purpose, and walked away from her to the further side of the chamber. 'It is true then?'

'Yes; it is true. Why should it not be true?'

'God in Heaven! And I to hear about it for the first time in such a fashion as this! He comes to see you, and because something does not go as he would have it, he turns round and tells me his story. But that he has quarrelled with you now, I should never have heard a syllable.' He had come up to her room determined not to believe a word of it. And now,

suddenly, there was no fault of which in his mind he was not ready to accuse her. He had been deceived, and she was to him a thing altogether different from that which he had believed her.

But she, too, was stung to wrath by the insinuation which his words contained. She knew herself to be absolutely innocent in every respect, except that of reticence to her husband. Though she was prepared to bear the weight of the punishment to which her silence had condemned her, yet she was sure of the purity of her own conduct. Knowing his disposition, she did not care to make light of her great fault, but now something was added, she hardly knew what, of which she knew herself to be innocent. Something was hinted as to the friendship remaining between her and this man, of which her husband, in his pride, should not have accused her. What! Did he think that she

had willingly received her late lover as her friend in his house and without his knowledge? If he thought that, then, indeed, must all be over between them. 'I do not know what it is that you suspect. You had better say it out at once.'

'Is this letter true?' and he held the letter up in his hand.

'I suppose it to be true. I do not know what it contains, but I presume it to be true.'

'You can read it,' and he threw the letter on the table before her.

She took it up and slowly passed her eyes over the words, endeavouring, as she did so, to come to some determination as to what her conduct should be. The purport of the words she did not fully comprehend, so fully was her mind occupied with thinking of the condition of her husband's mind; but they left upon her an impression that in the main Sir Francis Geral-

dine had told his story truly. 'Yes,' she said, 'it is true. Before I had met you I was engaged to marry this other man. Our engagement was broken off, and then mamma and I travelled abroad together. We there met you, and then you know the rest.'

'And you thought it proper that I should be kept in the dark!' She remained silent. She could not apologise to him after hearing the accusation which rankled in his bosom. She could not go about to explain that the moment fittest for an explanation had never come. She could not endeavour even to make him understand that because her story was so like his own, hers had not been told. She knew the comparative insignificance of her own fault, and yet circumstances had brought it about that she must stand oppressed with this weight of guilt in his eyes. As he should be just or unjust, or rather merciful or un-

merciful, so must she endure or be unable to endure her doom. 'I do not understand it,' he said, with affected calm. 'It is the case, then, that you have brought me into this position with premeditated falsehood, and have wilfully deceived me as to your previous engagement?'

'No!'

'How then?'

'There has been no wilful deceit,—no cause for deceit whatsoever. You were engaged to marry the lady who is now Mrs. Geraldine. I was engaged to marry Sir Francis.'

'But I told you all.'

'You did.'

'It would have been impossible that I should have asked you to be mine without telling you the whole story. She could not answer him. She knew it to be true,—that

he had told her and must have told her. But for herself it had been so improbable that he had not known of her engagement! And then there had been no opportunity,—no fitting opportunity. She knew that she had been wrong, foolish, ill-judging; but there had been nothing of that premeditated secrecy,—that secrecy with a cause, of which he had hinted that she was guilty. 'I suppose that I may take it as proved that I have been altogether mistaken?' This he said in the severest tone which he knew how to assume.

'How mistaken?'

'I have believed you to be sweet, and pure, and innocent, and true;—one in whom my spirit might refresh itself as a man bathes his heated limbs in the cool water. You were to have been to me the joy of my life,—my great treasure kept at home, open to no eyes

but my own; a thing perfect in beauty, to think of when absent and to be conscious of when present, without even the need of expression. "Let the wind come and the storm," I said to myself, "I cannot be unhappy, because my wife is my own." There is an external grace about you which was to my thinking only the culture of the woman within.'

'Well;—well.'

'It was a dream. I had better have married that little girl. She was silly, and soon loved some one better. But she did not deceive me.'

'And I,—have I deceived you?'

He paused before he answered her, and then spoke as though with much thought, 'Yes,' he said; 'yes.'

'Where? How?'

'I do not know. I cannot pretend even to guess. I shall probably never know. I

shall not strive to know. But I do know that you have deceived me. There has been, nay, there is, a secret between you and one whom I regard as among the basest of men, of which I have been kept purposely in ignorance.'

'There is no such secret.'

'You were engaged to be his wife. That at any rate has been kept from me. He has been here as your friend, and when he came, —into my house,—the purport of his visit was kept from me. He asked for something, which was refused, and consequently he has written to me. For what did he ask?'

'Ask! For nothing! What was there for him to ask?'

'I do not know. I cannot even pretend to guess. As I read his letter there must have been something. But it does not matter. While you have seemed to me to be one

thing, you have been another. You have been acting a part from the first moment in which we met, and have kept it up all through with admirable consistency. You are not that sweetly innocent creature which I have believed you to be.'

She knew that she was all that he had fancied her, but she could not say so. She had understood him thoroughly when he had told her that she had been to him the cool water in which the heated man might bathe his limbs; that she was the treasure to be kept at home. Even in her misery, something of delight had come to her senses as she heard him say that. The position described to her had been exactly that which it had been her ambition to fill. She knew that in spite of all that had come and gone she was still fit to fill it. There had been nothing,—not a thought to mar her innocence, her purity, her woman's

tenderness. She was all his, and he was certain to know every thought of her mind and every throb of her heart. She did believe that if he could read them all, he would be perfectly satisfied. But she could not tell him that it was so. Words so spoken will be the sweetest that can fall into a man's ear,—if they be believed. But let there come but the shadow of a doubt over the man's mind, let him question the sincerity of a tone, and the words will become untrue, mawkish and distasteful. A thing perfect in beauty! How was she to say that she would be that to him? And yet, understanding her error as she had done with a full intelligence, she could have sworn that it should be so. The beauty he had spoken of was not simply the sheen of her loveliness, nor the grace of her form. It was the entirety of her feminine attraction, including the purity of her soul, which was in truth still there in all

its perfection. But she could not tell him that he was mistaken in doubting her. Now he had told her that she was not that innocent creature which he had believed her to be. What was she to do? How was she to restore herself to his favour? But through it all there was present to her an idea that she would not humble herself too far. To the extent of the sin which she had committed she would humble herself if she knew how to do that without going beyond it. But further than that in justice both to him and to herself she would not go. 'If you have condemned me,' she said, 'there must be an end of it,—for the present.'

'Condemned you! Do you not condemn yourself? Have you attempted any word of excuse? Have you given any reason why I should have been kept in the dark? Your friend Miss Altifiorla knew it all I presume?'

'Yes, she knew it all.'

'And you would not have had her here if you could have avoided it lest she should tell me?'

'That is true. I wished to be the first to tell you myself.'

'And yet you had never whispered a word of it. Miss Altifiorla and Sir Francis it seems are friends.' Cecilia only shook her head. 'I heard yesterday at the station that they had gone to London together. I presume they are friends.'

Quickly the idea passed through Mrs. Western's mind that Miss Altifiorla had been untrue to her. She had kept her word to the letter in not having told the secret to her husband but she had discussed the whole matter with Sir Francis, and the letter which Sir Francis had written was the result. 'I do not know,' she said. 'If they be more to each other than chance acquaintance I do not know

it. From week to week and from day to day before our marriage the thing went on and the opportunity never came. Something would always fall from you which made me afraid to speak at that moment. Then we were married, and I found how wrong I had been. I still resolved to tell you, but put it off like a coward from day to day. Your sister had heard of my first engagement.'

'Did Bertha know it?'

'Yes; and like myself she was surprised that you should be so ignorant.'

'She might well be surprised.'

'Then I resolved to tell you. I would not do it till that other woman had left the house. I would not have her by to see your anger.'

'And now this is the way in which the history of your former life has reached my ears!' As he said this he held out in his hand

the fatal letter. 'This is the manner in which you have left me to be informed of a subject so interesting! I first hear from Sir Francis Geraldine that he and you a twelvemonth since were engaged together as man and wife.' Here she stood quite silent. She did not care to tell him that it was more than twelve months since. 'That you think to be becoming.'

'I do not think so.'

'That you feel to be compatible with my happiness!' Here, again, there was a pause, during which she looked full into his face. 'Such is not my idea. My happiness is wrecked. It is gone.' Here he made a motion with his hand, as though to show that all his bliss had flown away from him.

'Oh, George, if you love me, do not speak like that!'

'Love you! Yes I love you. I do not suppose that love can be made to go at once,

as I find that esteem may do, and respect, and veneration.'

'Oh, George, those are hard words!'

'Is it not so? This morning you were to me of all God's creatures the brightest and the best. When I entered your room just now it was so that I regarded you. Can you now be the brightest and the best? Has not all that romance been changed at a moment's notice? But, alas! love does not go after the same fashion.' Then he turned shortly round and left the room.

She remained confounded and awe-stricken. There had been that about him which seemed to declare a settled purpose—as though he had intended to leave her for ever. She sat perfectly still, thinking of it, thinking of the injustice of the sentence that had been pronounced upon her. Though she had deserved much, she had not deserved this. Though she had ex-

pected punishment, she had not expected punishment so severe. In about twenty minutes her maid came up to her, and with a grave face asked whether she would wish that breakfast should be sent to her in her own room. Mr. Western had sent to ask the question. 'Yes,' said she,—'if he pleases.' There could be no good in attempting to conceal from the servants a misery so deep and so lasting as this.

CHAPTER XII.

MR. WESTERN'S DECISION.

WHAT should she do with herself? Her breakfast was brought to her. At noon she was told that Mr. Western had gone out for the day and would not return till the evening. She was asked whether she would have her pony carriage, and, on refusing it, was persuaded by her maid to walk in the grounds. 'I think I will go out,' she said, and went and walked for an hour. Her maid had been peculiarly her own and had come to her from Exeter; but she would not talk to her maid about her quarrel with her husband, though she was sure that the girl knew of the quarrel. Those messages had

certainly come direct from her husband, and could not, she thought, have been sent without some explanation of the facts. She could see on the faces of all the household that everyone knew that there was a quarrel. Twenty times during the day would she have had her husband's name on her tongue had there been no quarrel. It had been with her as though she had had a pride in declaring herself to be his wife. But now she was silent respecting him altogether. She could not bring herself to ask the gardener whether Mr. Western wished this thing or the other. The answer had always been that the master wished the paths and the shrubs and the flowers to be just as she wished them. But now not a word was spoken. For an hour she walked among the paths, and then returned to her own room. Would she have her dinner in the dining-room? If so, the master would have his in the library. Then she could restrain herself no longer,

but burst into tears. No; she would have no dinner. Let them bring her a cup of tea in her own room.

There she sat thinking of her condition, wondering from hour to hour what was to be the end of it. From hour to hour she sat, and can hardly have been said to think. She lost herself in pondering first over her own folly and then upon his gross injustice. She could not but marvel at her own folly. She had in truth known from the first moment in which she had resolved to accept his offer, that it was her duty to tell him the story of her adventure with Sir Francis Geraldine. It should have been told indeed before she had accepted his offer, and she could not now forgive herself in that she had been silent. 'You must know my story,' she should have said, 'before there can be a word more spoken between us.' And then with a clear brow and without a tremor in her

voice she could have told it. But she had allowed herself to be silent, simply because he had told the same story, and then the moment had never come. She could not forgive herself. She could never entirely forgive herself, even though the day should come in which he might pardon her.

But would he ever pardon her? Then her mind would fly away to the injustice of his condemnation. He had spoken to her darkly, as though he had intended to accuse her of some secret understanding with Sir Francis. He had believed her to be guilty of some underhand plot against his happiness, carried on with the man to whom she had been engaged! Of what was it that he had imagined her to be guilty? What was the plot of which in his heart he accused her? Then her imagination looked out and seemed to tell her that there could be but one. Her husband suspected her

of having married him while her heart was still the property of that other man! And as she thought of this, indignation for the time almost choked her grief. Could it be possible that he, to whom she had given everything with such utter unreserve, whom she had made the god of her idolatry, to whom she had been exactly that which he had known so well how to describe,—could it be that he should have had every thought concerning her changed in a moment, and that from believing her to be all pure and all innocent, he should have come to regard her as a thing so vile as that? She almost tore her hair in her agony as she said that it must be so. He had told her that his respect, his esteem, and his veneration, had all passed away. She could never consent to live with him trusting solely to his love without esteem.

But as the evening passed away and the

night came, and as the duration of the long hours of the day seemed to grow upon her, and as no tidings came to her from her lord, she began to tell herself that it was unbecoming that she should remain without knowing her fate. The whole length of the tedious day had passed since he had left her and had condemned her to breakfast in solitude. Then she accused herself of having been hard with him during that interview, of having failed to submit herself in repentance, and she told herself that if she could see him once more, she might still whisper to him the truth and soften his wrath. But something she must do. She had dismissed her maid for the last time, and sat miserably in her room till midnight. But still she could not go to bed till she had made some effort. She would at any rate write to him one word. She got up therefore and seated herself at the table with pen and ink before her. She would write

the whole story, she thought, simply the whole story, and would send it to him, leaving it to him to believe or to disbelieve it as he pleased. But as she bent over the table she felt that she could not write such a letter as that without devoting an entire day to it. Then she rapidly scrawled a few words:—

'DEAREST GEORGE,—Come to me and let me tell you everything.—Your own CECILIA.'

Then she addressed it to him and put it under her pillow that she might send it to him as soon as she should wake in the morning. Having done so she got into her bed and wept herself asleep.

When the girl came into the room in the morning she at once asked after her husband. 'Is Mr. Western up yet?' The maid informed her with an air of grave distress that Mr. Western had risen early and had been driven away from the house to catch a morning train.

More than that the girl could not say. But she believed that a letter had been left on the library table. She had heard John say that there was such a letter. But John had gone with his master to the station. Then she sent down for the letter, and within a few minutes held it in her hand.

We will now go back to Mr. Western. He, as soon as he had left his wife's room in the morning went down-stairs, and began to consider within himself what was the cause of this evil thing which had been done to him. A very evil thing had been done. He did feel that the absolute happiness which had been his for the last few days had perished and gone from him. He was a man undemonstrative, and silent in expressing his own feelings, but one who revelled inwardly in his own feelings of contentment when he was content. His wife had been to him all that he had dreamt that a

woman should be. She had filled up his cup with infinite bliss, though he had never told even to her how full his cup had been. But in everything he had striven to gratify her, and had been altogether successful. To go on from day to day with his books, with his garden, with his exercise, and above all with his wife, had been enough to secure absolute happiness. He had suspected no misfortune, and had anticipated no drawback. Then on a sudden there had come this damnable letter, which had made him wretched for the time, even though he were sure that it was not true. But he had known that it was only for the time, for he had been sure that it was untrue. Then the blow had fallen, and all his contentment was banished. There was some terrible mystery,—some mystery of which he could not gauge the depth. Though he was gracious and confiding and honest when left at peace, still he was

painfully suspicious when something arose of which the circumstances were kept back from him. There was a secret here,—there was certainly a secret; and it was shared between his wife, whom of all human beings he had loved the best, and the man whom he most thoroughly despised. As long as it was possible that the whole tale might be an invention he would not believe a word against his wife; but, when it appeared that there was certainly some truth in it, then it seemed that there was nothing too monstrous for him to believe.

After his solitary breakfast he walked abroad, and turned it all in his mind. He had given her the opportunity of telling him everything, and she had told him nothing. So he declared to himself. That one damning fact was there,—clear as daylight, that she had willingly bestowed herself upon this baronet, this creature who to his thinking was vile as a

man could be. As to that there was no doubt. That was declared. How different must she have been from that creature whom he had fancied that he had loved, when she would have willingly consented to be the wife of such a man? And this had been done within a year,—as he said. And then she had married him, telling him nothing of it, though she must have known that he would discover it as soon as she was his wife. It suited her to be his wife,—for some reason which he could not perceive. She had achieved her object;—but not on that account need he live with her. It had been an affair of money, and his money she might have.

He came back and got his horse, as the motion of walking was not fast enough for him in his passion. It was grievous to be borne,—the fact that he had been so mistaken in choosing for himself a special woman as a com-

panion of his life. He had desired her to be all honour, all truth, all simplicity, and all innocence. And instead of these things he had encountered fraud and premeditated deceit. She was his wife indeed;—but not on that account need he live with her.

And then his curiosity was raised. What was the secret between them? There must have been some question of money, as to which at the last moment they had disagreed. To his thinking it was vile that a young woman should soil her mind with such thoughts and marry or reject a man at the last moment because of his money. All that should be arranged for her by her friends, so that she might go to her husband without having been mixed in any question of a sordid matter. But these two had probably found at the last moment that their income was insufficient for their wants, and therefore his purse had been thought

convenient. As all these things, with a thousand others, passed through his mind he came to the determination that at any rate they must part.

He came home, and before he ate his dinner he wrote to her that letter, of which the contents shall now be given. It was a most unreasonable letter. But to him in his sorrow, in his passion, it seemed that every word was based upon reason.

'DEAR CECILIA,' the letter ran,

'I need hardly tell you that I was surprised by the facts which you at last told me this morning. I should have been less pained, perhaps, had they come to me in the first instance from yourself instead of from Sir Francis Geraldine. But I do not know that the conclusion to which I have been forced would have been in any way altered had such been the case. I can hardly, I fear, make you understand the shock with which I have received

the intelligence, that a month or two before I proposed to you you had been the promised wife of that man. I need hardly tell you that had I known that it was so I should not have offered you my hand. To say the least of it, I was led into my marriage by mistake. But a marriage commenced with such a mistake as that cannot be happy.

'As to your object I cannot surmise. But I suppose that you were satisfied, thinking me to be of a nature especially soft and gentle. But I fear I am not so. After what has passed I cannot bring myself to live with you again. Pray believe it. We have now parted for ever.

'As to your future welfare, and as to the honour which will be due to my name, which you must continue to bear, I am quite willing to make any arrangements which friends of yours shall think to be due to you. Half my

income you shall have, and you shall live here in this house if it be thought well for you. In reference to these things your lawyers had better see my lawyers. In the meantime my bankers will cash your cheques. But believe me that I am gone, not to return.

'Your affectionate husband,

'GEORGE WESTERN.'

These words he wrote, struggling to be cool and rational while he wrote them, and then he departed, leaving the letter upon the table.

END OF THE FIRST VOLUME.

LONDON: PRINTED BY
SPOTTISWOODE AND CO., NEW-STREET SQUARE
AND PARLIAMENT STREET